







# THE GREAT HOUSE IN THE PARK

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"THE HOUSE ON CHARLES STREET"

and

"THE HOUSE ON SMITH SQUARE" ✓

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# THE GREAT HOUSE IN THE PARK



# The Great House in the Park

## CHAPTER I TALK IN A FOG

**T**HE fog which blanketed the mouth of the Mersey, was black as the pit and startlingly cold. Under its canopy the ship moved slow and more slowly; bells rang, voices called out of the dusk, and all that joyful bustle which precedes landing received an unexpected check. At first, the passengers refused to accept the omens, but pranced the decks cheering one another with hopeful interchanges, while some among them professed to see the Liverpool docks so near that real delay would be unthinkable. But, as the afternoon drew on toward evening, and the liner remained immovable in the river, the black water running by her sides, it was plain from the silence all about them and the gloom on the stewards' faces that the chance to dock that night was drawing to a close. A few brave souls refused to abandon hope; they kept loudly insisting that the fog had lightened or that they heard the

engines of the port-officers' launch, but after awhile they too succumbed to the chilly darkness without and retired to the lights of the saloon.

Three or four men only remained on deck, continuing to take their usual walk with cigar or pipe and the philosophy born of long experience. Chance had it that two of these found themselves leaning on the rail, elbow to elbow. One was an elderly Englishman, the other a young American. During the voyage each had noticed the other with an interest leading to an occasional interchange, so that on this last evening they had already made the opening moves of an acquaintance. Something in the circumstances of the moment, the shrouding fog, the unknown land lying beyond, led the younger man to feel confidence in the responsiveness of his companion.

"Of course it's awfully provoking, isn't it?" So he began on the obvious topic of the delay. "But as it's all new to me, a day more or less doesn't matter. I guess it's different—harder—for you because you're going home?"

To the interrogatory note in this speech the elder man at once responded.

"Quite so. Yes. It plays the deuce with my engagements. I shall have to telegraph later." He paused, in his turn lightly questioning: "So this is your first crossing? You've never before been in England?"

"Never in England. But—no! it's not my first crossing," the young man answered. "I was over in France with the rest of them."

"Ah, yes! With the rest of them." And by



his kindly intonation, the Englishman recalled that Odyssey. "Well, you'll find much to interest you in the Old Country. We're more hospitable often than your countrymen give us credit."

"I should say so! But *that's* the whole problem!" The words came in a rush of perplexity which the speaker seemed unable to contain; and he halted as if puzzled and abashed. The elder turned his head, so real had this trouble sounded, and their eyes met with some intentness. The Englishman replied, "ah-h?" with a tranquil response, and waited, in his own mind wondering what the problem was.

The deck was by this time deserted save for an occasional passing of sailor or steward. From the saloon sounds of music showed how the passengers were trying to console themselves. Beyond the narrow lighted space the night shut down like an iron door, and the moment held a certain intimacy, of which these two, each sensitive after his own fashion, were aware. Yet it appeared hard for the younger to continue, so his companion aided him with an urbane comment on the geniality of the average American as compared to the habit of his own countrymen.

"You ought to have no trouble understanding us," he went on, his gaze fixed on the black curtain before them; "and a new country is always an adventure, or so it seemed to me at your age."

"There's no doubt about the adventure!" The American ejaculated, "it's only——" Again,

he paused as if helpless, and the other, beginning to be definitely interested, flicked away his cigar-ash and sought for an opening.

"It's a door to which the American possesses the key, if only he knew it. As a people, we're easy-going and we love to be amused. You people know how to do that. Then under our surface gruffness we're rather apt to be sentimental and romantic—"

"That's it—romantic! That's what I've been wondering." The boy seemed to seize on the idea as a beam of light in his darkness and added eagerly: "Are English people impulsive too, sir, do you know?"

This question surprised his hearer. "Bless my soul—I suppose so," he replied. "What makes you ask?" Then, with a typical simplicity and directness, he continued; "I say—it's no affair of mine to question you—you don't know me, but my name is Flippin, Sir John Flippin. I'm a London barrister, a K. C., if you know what that is."

The stranger said that he thought he did and offered his name in return as Richard Monkton and his home as Philadelphia. While making this introduction, he surveyed his new acquaintance with satisfaction in the handsome, sturdy type, side-whiskered and large-framed, rosy and active, and with an old-fashioned touch in his dress that Richard felt to be in keeping. Truly, Flippin, K. C. was just as one would have it; and Dickens himself could not have done better . . . .

"I suppose my asking that seems funny," he



began, as they started to pace the empty deck; and Sir John, deciding that he meant *odd*, grunted acquiescence. "You see, it's all been so sudden, so strange—I've hardly known what to think....As things were, I was glad to burn my bridges....Now it's done, I'm bothered and I need counsel from somebody who knows this world. That's the truth, sir."

Sir John rightly determined that the boy could only tell his story in his own way, which would necessitate sweeping out certain reticences, and thus occupy a little time. He had already taken a fancy to the speaker—a fancy based on certain very small things, such as the turn of the eye and lip, the picturesque air which bespoke a sub-conscious link between them, and therefore he remained patient.....

"Quite so," he encouraged; "that's a lawyer's business, y'know. If there's anything you don't understand about our ways—I know things are different across the water—I'll be very glad to help."

"You're awfully good," the youth said gratefully, and thus without more ado, plunged into his story. He told it simply, with small self-consciousness, and Sir John found him even more engaging as they walked to and fro. In the first place he was good-looking in an unusual way, a tall fellow in his early twenties, very slim, with a high-bridged nose, heavy brows over clear, clever eyes, a spirited head and fine hands. Had he been more robust, he would have been exceedingly handsome, but earlier in the voyage, Sir

John had read a recent illness in the boy's pallor and look of anxiety and strain. As the story progressed, however, the barrister felt that these were, perhaps, otherwise accounted for, and he kept to his steady, sympathetic attention which the teller found so soothing. Meanwhile, Sir John's unspoken comments were philosophical, to the effect that this strange train of events was far less strange than it would have been before the War, since when the impulses guiding human action were less under restraint and life's uncertainties far more overwhelming. Sir John Flippin was a soft-hearted old boy and the little narrative touched him.

Richard Monkton's father, he explained, had inherited what used to be called a competency and the boy had been brought up quietly and comfortably in what is perhaps the most comfortable city in the United States. The elder Monkton had never been active in his profession of the law and after his wife's death, years before, had withdrawn from practice to devote his time to his son, to his old-fashioned clubs, and to his collections of books and *objets d'art*. These were his solace in a changing world, and the son depicted him as a man tranquil and absorbed in recondite pleasures and perchance too forgetful of practical things. The young man went to school and college, and then, caught by the tide, to France in the Army. While still serving, the father suddenly died, and when young Monkton returned in 1919, it was to find his world in ruins.

"Before I went, he told me we'd lost money,"



Richard said with an effort; for this was the hard part of his tale; "but at that time I think he still thought there'd be enough for me to finish college and study painting, which was what I wanted to do. What went wrong I still don't quite know—he didn't realize the War, I fear, and how values had changed. Anyway, it turned out there was hardly enough to take care of things for other people, old responsibilities, you see. Everything had to be sold, and the only thing left for me was just to turn in and work."

"Beastly hard luck," Sir John said kindly, "but you had relatives—friends?"

"No near relatives, unfortunately; but *of course* Dad had lots of friends," Richard loyally hastened to assure him; "only, everything was in such a mess, you remember the slump and the high prices? Well, I did odd jobs where I could and then an opening came in one of our big Trust Companies. Lots of our boys began that way and this was a good chance. I really hated that sort of job, but I had no excuse for declining it, you see," he paused, a little wistfully.

"And now I'm coming to the queer part. Some weeks before that time, a letter came to me from London, the writer saying he was a friend of Dad's though they had not met for years, and who wanted to know all about my poor father's death. He was an Englishman, a collector of old books, and he referred to an illuminated Virgil, which he said Dad had bought from him years before. Of course I know all about *that*. Dad was crazy about such things.

"The name signed at the end was altogether strange to me; but Dad used to correspond about his treasures with people all over the world. I thought the letter a little strange with some of the questions it asked and so forth, but collectors are apt to be odd folk, so I just answered it and forgot about it. Two weeks ago there came another letter; I have it here."

The speaker pulled a wallet from his pocket and drew out an envelope.

"Will you read it for yourself?" he asked Sir John; "and tell me what you think?"

So thick the fog closed in upon them, chilly and soft, that the decks were darkened. Although the handwriting of the letter was remarkably distinct, printed, rather than written, in a beautiful, even script, yet Flippin was forced to hold it close under the lamp that he might read in that shadowing blackness. He did so in a manifest amazement, after his first glance brought forth an ejaculation of "God bless my soul!" and a side-look at Dick which showed he had reasons for this astonishment of which the young man was ignorant.

The letter read as follows:

London, March 15.

"DEAR RICHARD MONKTON, JR:

"Your letter makes it all too certain that your father was my old friend. We had not kept in touch since the War, largely, I think, because the changes in our world were depressing to us both and would not bear discussing, but at one time we had been intimate and I feel very sorrowful when I think that he is gone. Our friendship dated from 1896—the year, is it not?, of your own birth, when your



parents were in England for many months. I am glad to hear from your letter that you resemble him, especially in regard to the eyebrows and the nick in the left ear . . . .

"Now, I desire to ask a favor of you. Your father's death raises the question of an ancient obligation,—no doubt forgotten by him, the obliger, but remembered by me. As you tell me you are now alone and with the need, like so many other brave soldiers, to face life anew, I want to see and talk with you and I want your help in discharging my debt. Come over to England prepared to make me a visit which will interest you and may be of great service to me. I write this letter surrounded by the beautiful things which your father loved and which, since you resemble him, you cannot fail to love also. There may be an opening here in England for the future. In any event I beg you, my dear young friend, for your good father's sake, to take the next steamer and send me a cable message when that steamer will land. And you will forgive an old fellow if he presumes to enclose a bank draft for £100, that your sailing may not be delayed.

"Yours very sincerely,

"CHARLES VENTRIS."

"Charles Ventris!" repeated Sir John Flippin and started over his eye-glasses at the young man, "And you tell me your name is *Monkton*?" he again ejaculated, "God bless my soul!"

"Well, I guess you see the rest for yourself," the boy confessed, still with that undercurrent of perplexity in face and voice with which he had started the interview. "It wasn't as if I had a very cheerful prospect at home, was it? Dad gone and the house and all his stuff sold—it was bleak enough. . . . . I can't say I relished the idea of the Trust Company. Most fellows take it as a matter of course but that clerical sort of work appalled me. And—well, I guess we're all more

restless since the War; those of us who were in France particularly. We've lost the habit of building for the future, or playing safe as our fathers did, because we know how in a breath revolution or war may upset everything..... yes: we're all more restless."

He drew a breath of impatient acceptance of these harsh facts and hurried on:

"Of course I was lonely—and I had been run down ever since the Argonne, just a bit of a wound, nothing much, but the doctor called it over-strain—idiotic at my age, but there you are! When I thought of going down to Broad and Chestnut Streets every single morning for all the rest of my life, I just couldn't bear it. So here I am."

Sir John Flippin hardly appeared to listen. With his square mouth pursed and his heavy shoulders hunched, he seemed still concentrated upon the letter he turned and re-turned in his hands. When he spoke, it was to ask a question.

"—that you resemble him especially in regard to the twist in the eyebrows and the nick in the left ear," he read. "What does Ventris mean by that?"

Richard's face lit with a sudden smile which wonderfully brightened it, as he traced with his forefinger the outline of his level brows to where they twisted into a little peak just above the nose. "You see? He asked me in the first letter if I'd any Monkton marks. There they are: just like father's and *his* father's. My left ear is nicked too—it's in the family."



He paused, expecting the barrister to reply, but Sir John was still thoughtfully silent.

"Since I've been aboard the ship," Richard Monkton continued, quite plainly approaching the heart of his problem, "there's been more time to think it over—I can't help wondering whether I've not been an impetuous ass! People don't send five hundred dollars like that for nothing. It's too queer for words. . . . What does it mean, and who is he? Did you ever hear the name, sir?"

"Charles Ventris? Oh yes; I know Charles Ventris well," the barrister replied, starting to fill himself a pipe, having apparently tired of his cigar. Dick looked at him, surprised.

"You do?" he eagerly cried. "Who is he? What's he like?"

Sir John sheltered the match in his big palms until his pipe was drawing well before he answered the American's query, lawyer-fashion, by asking another.

"Didn't your father ever tell you anything about Charles Ventris?" he enquired.

"I never heard the name mentioned that I can remember. . . . But, as I said before, Dad corresponded with every sort of person about his collections—old furniture and porcelains and books. He was devoted to 'em. I love that 'sort of thing myself—though I don't know all *he* knew. . . . I had to be away a lot at school and college and I might not know all his correspondents concerning these things," Richard explained.

"H'm. . . quite. That might account for it."

Sir John handed Dick his letter, while his face showed that he was still thinking deeply. He began to talk, slowly but more freely, using the bluff speech, the contractions of his caste, "Charles Ventris...h'm-m...is rather a well-known figure. We belong to the same Club; I see him often, though we're not intimate. He's a man with a hobby—oh, more than a hobby! a passion—just as you describe your father—for beautiful old things—furniture—paintings—but especially for illuminated manuscripts. He is considered the first authority on *those*. So you see, he might very well know your father."

"I see. Is he an old man?"

"By no means. Still in his prime. A knowledgeable man and with a personality which fascinates many people," Sir John said, unaware that his standard of age differed considerably from that of this citizen of the Land of Youth.

"Are his collections large?" Dick asked, deeply interested.

"Oh, he doesn't collect for himself—though they say his rooms are wonderful," Sir John proceeded. "For many years M. Charles (that's the name most people know him by, just 'Monsieur Charles,' as the French call him) was the secretary, curator, expert authority, and purchasing agent for Sir Piers Monkton of Shank. Have you ever heard of Shank?"

"I seem to recall the name—it's a house—or a castle, isn't it?"

"Shank never was a *castle*," Sir John hastened to inform him, with that accurate knowledge of



terms in use among cultivated Englishmen which is the despair of Americans. "It isn't fortified. The foundation, you see, is ecclesiastical. The mansion is largely Tudor. It's the seventh wonder of the world."

"Why—" Dick hesitated; "I thought there were lots of splendid Great Houses in England?"

"There are many. But none like Shank. It is not only perhaps the most perfect example of its kind that exists, but it houses the most magnificent collections in the world. It's full of priceless things. Paintings—why, there are seventeen Reynolds and nine Velasquez, to name only two groups. And the manuscripts—you've surely heard of the Monkton Missal—the Shank Treyze Hystoires?"

The other shook his head. "Fear I haven't," he confessed.

"Your correspondent there has devoted his life to it," went on the barrister. "When Sir Piers succeeded, there was little money and the collections were in disorder. Looked for awhile as though he might have to sell. This man Ventris appeared. He took charge, he studied, he worked, he weeded out; he sold here, he bought there, and always to advantage. He discovered manuscripts, treasures no one had known about. Between them, he and the owner made it what it is. That's why I'm sorry for him now."

"Sir Piers died, then?"

"Yes: about two months ago." Sir John's even voice continued as he walked the deck smoking imperturbably. "And you see he left

no child. So the whole thing goes to a young gentleman who cares a good deal more about big game shooting than he does about Jacobean furniture or illuminated manuscripts. Ventriss one is sorry for. It's quite a tragedy."

While he talked, Sir John still gave Dick the impression that his mind was pursuing a different train of thought to obscure conclusions. Yet his next question was direct enough:

"What bothers you about this letter?"

Dick hesitated, finding it hard to define. "The money—I suppose. It seems sudden from a stranger. Ought I to take it? And what are the services and obligations he talks about?"

"Quite so," said Sir John, while inwardly reflecting on this sensitive pride; "perhaps that letter is a little odd—eccentric—but then Charles Ventriss is rather an odd fish. I don't pretend to understand him myself. He's not of my world at all, and he is absorbed in one idea. You know how such people are?"

Dick nodded: he recalled Dad with a twinge.

"Ventriss isn't like anybody else. He has no family apparently. I don't know where he came from originally—Wales, I believe. Oh, he's a gentleman, but a little odd—curious—I can't explain it. He has given his life to Shank and soon Shank will be his affair no longer. And Lady Monkton—hard luck for her after all her work—h'm, h'm—what was it I was hearin' t'other day . . . .?" Here Sir John's voice tailed off into a mumble and a pause fell which lasted some moments before the listener, after waiting awhile



in a very intensity of eagerness, ventured to recall him:

“You were telling me about this Lady Monkton, sir?”

The barrister returned to the talk with a short, explosive sigh.

“H’m, so I was, so I was..... Well, when Sir Piers became a widower a good many years ago .....under distressing circumstances..... sad, very sad!...he grew more of a recluse than ever. Ventris and he were inseparable...lived entirely at Shank...worked over the collections ...took no interest in anything else, y’know. This lady was secretary or assistant curator; she’s a wonder, knows everything about paintings, antiques, and so on. Monkton married her and that was that.”

“Who was she?”

This enquiry, natural to one with Richard’s birthplace, struck the elder man as oddly English, and he turned to appraise the face beside him. How thin and well-modelled it was—and how spirited, with the clear eyes under those peaked brows!

“Foreigner, they say; awf’ly attractive—what? She was the only woman Monkton could have chosen who wouldn’t have broken that friendship....Sort of family affair and lived happily ever after. And now, it must be bitter to her... ..These great ladies....England’s full of ’em, dethroned queens living in Bath or Bournemouth ....had her day and has to give up Shank. My Lord, but it must hurt!” He was knocking his

pipe-bowl on the taffrail as he added: "Well, I've seen odd things in my day. Pretty dramatic all this, my young friend, eh what...?"

Already Sir John was adopting the tone he might have used to the son of an old friend, nor did he seem surprised when the other turned toward him the wise smile of youth and answered: "'Cause it's true, I guess, sir.... Life's the bold dramatist, anyhow.... But there's nothing in all this to explain why the antiquarian chap should send for me; now, is there?"

Again Sir John fell into silence. "Perhaps not; yet—I'm by no means sure.... Ventriss is not like other people, and just now he must be upset. Who can tell what impulse has moved him toward you? And in any case, I see nothing to trouble you in it."

He seemed to Dick to be arguing with himself and Dick therefore took the side of Sir John's unexpressed objections.

"You've made it plainer, of course," he admitted; "Yet all the same I can't help feeling I am wrong to come."

The barrister heard the doubt and nodded in sympathy.

"'Course I understand. Yet I think we're both a bit fanciful.... You don't like Queer Street,—neither do I, but the chap's an oddity and you are committed to nothing."

"I've taken his money," Richard insisted.

"True. But money can be repaid. Now, I'd take this as a holiday—after the Argonne." Sir John's voice was kind. "And here's my card and



my address. Look me up when you're in London. If anything troubles you, come to me. Don't hesitate."

So hearty, so cordial was this offer, so wholesome and direct the personality making it, that Dick began to feel, not only re-assured, but the least bit ashamed of his nervous anxiety. Sir John made the whole affair much simpler; and Dick's rather morbid dread already began to give way to a sense of youthful adventure, which was far more normal. This he expressed in grateful if stumbling phrases, but manfully; and afresh the elder man was conscious of liking. Flippin could see what this young fellow's charm might be, when no longer clouded with a certain over-intensity which should be honored for its cause.

"A holiday will do you good, my lad," he repeated. "Things get out of proportion when one hasn't been in health. And you've been alone too much....Mind you come to me if you want to know anything about the customs of the natives."

Richard laughed and promised, and then, lighter of heart, disappeared to his cabin to dress for dinner. He left Sir John still smoking on deck and wearing the expression of firm kindness, which had first attracted the American to him. After Dick had gone, however, Flippin's look gradually gave way to one of heavy perplexity, which continued for the half-hour longer that he still stood, leaning on the rail and staring into the blind fog.



## CHAPTER II

### THE STRANGE LITTLE STREET

**D**ICK MONKTON had been far more affected by the events of the last two years than he admitted in his conversation with Sir John Flippin. His nature, high-strung, imaginative and intense, lacked the stolidity fittest for war-service and had suffered spiritually, even more than physically, from the strain and horror and exaltation of the task. His wound had not been serious, but, under the effects of it, his physical strength had been lowered. Illness heightened and accentuated his feeling of disorientation and loss. He felt the War: he felt his father's death and the following disintegration of life, with a keenness which spared his nerves nothing, and this door into the unknown had offered what appeared like an escape.

For there was more to run away from than just grief and loss. The confusion in Mr. Monkton's affairs was of a peculiar kind—brought about by world-pressure on a quite unbusiness-like dilettante—and had involved the affairs of others to a startling and disagreeable extent.

Harsh things were said; harsh measures had been inevitable; and Richard was not the kind to try and save his own fortunes at the expense of the two old ladies, whose adviser his father had unfortunately been. He might have done so, his lawyer told him, surveying the white-faced youth with appraising eyes—but of course he would not. To strip oneself of an intolerable burden had been Dick's thought, and thus he had hurried the collection to auction and had accepted the first offer for the house in Clinton Street. When the Trust Company opening came, Dick at least knew that he owed it to those old friends whose esteem mattered and who approved his course. If these were few, they counted; and who cared about the others who whispered that he did these things only because he had to do them? Such whisperings came from the newer set—who resented the elder society because its standard of dignity and cultivation always criticized their standards of motor cars and money. Perhaps, unfortunately for himself, Dick belonged by nature and by tradition to these elder Philadelphians; and thus life was made harder for him. He knew he ought not to think it a miserable prospect, this chance of a livelihood which Dad's friends thought him so lucky to obtain, but his birthplace assumed an aspect cold and unfriendly, so that he longed to get away.

Of course, he was not at all well... The past had been so different.....full of pain was that memory! All American cities have tended to lose individuality and be forced into conforma-



tion with a universal type,—but in Richard's home this alteration had been slow. His boyhood held still the background of a friendly and reposeful city, just emerging from eighteenth century Georgian architectural forms into the commercial architectural forms generally prevalent elsewhere. The house to which he ran from school was red brick with a white doorstep—the top of the front door wore the prim curve of a Quaker bonnet. In the parlor-windows, the panes of glass were mauve. An elderly colored butler stood on the step to watch the boy go, or opened the door on his return with an air of affectionate interest.

“Yes, ma chile,” was the inevitable formula of greeting, “you move quiet 'cause yo' father's in the liberry.”

Up the long, straight, steep stairs, one whooped and ran. The room at the head of it had green walls and shabby, comfortable chairs and sofas, a hard coal fire and green shaded lamps. Old prints and engravings covered all those wall-spaces which were not occupied with cabinets or books. Sunshine came in at the bay-window. On the mantel were pipes and a clock and photographs of Dad's cronies, whose eminence he explained to his son—the Shakesperean scholar—the medieval historian—the great nerve-specialist—the quaint gentleman with leonine hair, a cloak and pumps. Their faces were self-contained and not a little austere....

Dick remembered books and reviews on the centre table, the *Ledger* lying on a stool nearby,



and the face turned toward him with a smile. He remembered the savory amplitude of luncheon—and how the sunlight falling on Dad's glass of Madeira splashed the white cloth with gold.. Old Daniel served them, grave, deferential and affectionate, always smiling with the same appreciation when Dad said: "Oh Daniel, Daniel, thou little knowest....!"

When one was full of lunch, one went out—perhaps to play in the Square, perhaps to walk in the Park.... Of course this was when one was quite a little boy; but somehow it stood out in one's memory clearer than the years of school or college which had been broken by the chasm of the War....

Before the War came, Dick had been too young to be more than just vaguely troubled by Dad's increasing passion for collecting things. At moments, he wondered that Dad never went "down-town" any longer, nor left Clinton Street, even in the sultry summers, except to attend a sale somewhere. He knew that Dad dropped off one or two Clubs and was apt to mention this manuscript or that piece of china as having been bought at a sacrifice. Dad would tell Dick about them with an air to suggest that it was wholly on the boy's account the object had been acquired. Like most people who really love such things, Mr. Monkton almost always paid top prices and seldom bought at a bargain. Bargains were for dealers: and he was a lover, who suffered and sacrificed for love.

So, when they had to be sold in haste, in the

slump following the Armistice, they sold at a loss.... Dick hated to think about it, that sale.... The pair of green vases in the corner-cabinet; the two Ming princesses with pale uplifted hands which he was never allowed to touch—where were they now? Most of his friends couldn't understand how he felt—to their minds Dick had been, as it were, set free from care and responsibility—set free for sport and for gayety. Who cared about a lot of old things which always got broken, or what house one lived in—or even if one lived in a house at all? Those Little Gods—so sacred to the early generations of Americans—who, like Rachel, cherished them and carried them into a far country, were now being gleefully thrown away by this new generation, who cared nothing but to free itself, to strip its house of life as bare as a railway station.

Dick's friends thought him rather lucky to tumble into a good, steady Bank, which always shut on legal holidays! As for the arts and France, whoever wanted to see Paris again after those horrible, horrible months? So Dick's friends thought and said to him; and Dick, who was deeply conscious of integral differences, found it wise to keep them to himself. To express them savored of complaint or cowardice. Undoubtedly, this added to his sudden and lonely restlessness.....

These were the thoughts and pictures in his head as Dick sat next day in the express from Liverpool to London and looked forth upon an unfamiliar landscape. April in this country



seemed to cover the land with sunless mist, through which shone the green of a scanty and capricious leafage. In the midlands the fog of Liverpool turned to a fine rain, and this, in its turn, gave way to the soft, dull greyness of the South....

The train rattled along. The young man, sitting in his corner, was aware of odd fancies rising one after the other to the surface of his mind. How crowded the streets must be, this spring afternoon, in front of that great, marble Bank! He was glad he had talked overnight with Sir John Flippin. It was lucky there wasn't any girl he minded leaving—so far, he had never found it easy to get below the surface with girls. They all seemed absorbed in and excited about such funny things.....dancing, or tennis or social service. One had not been tempted to reveal one's main interest to them. Once he had tried, but the bewilderment in the clear, shallow eyes had checked this hesitating advance..... Of course they were the finest girls in the world, everybody knew, but still he was glad there was no one in particular.... This journey was momentous: it might lead very likely to some job over here and so change his whole outlook..... Not a bad idea that he knew something about antiquarians and collectors and their ways. He prefigured his host to come as a crusty eccentric...but he was glad to have talked the matter over with the barrister, although it was plain that Sir John had certain reservations on the subject of this Mr. Ventris.... Perhaps that was



the reason why even the talk had not cleared away Dick's own uneasiness—or perhaps he was homesick? Yet he had longed to get away from that alien birthplace where his home was his no longer—from the dull, rectangular streets where he would walk but to daily drudgery. Escape had seemed so glorious! Oh, this was just a passing mood and the K. C. was right—it was no mood in which to enter a holiday....

Dusk fell and lights shone forth by the time London was reached. Dick got a taxi quickly, for his modest kit consisted mainly of two big bags. When he told the address, he felt a thrill and for the first time captured the joy of adventure. And London, of all cities the most romantic, by its grey, sober noncommittal aspect, gave adventure its proper background..... So many streets and squares and crescents and more streets, with big houses and interesting people in them! With beating heart he looked forth eagerly, this side and that, challenging the unknown.....

The cab seemed forever twisting in and out of short streets; cutting across dingy squares; turning into centres of light where crowds hastened, turning into quieter quarters where the lamp beat on empty pavements...halting in wide thoroughfares among banks of motors.

On and on, round a square with a big statue to a curving crescent of mansions, toward a church. Round the church to a broad street with many shops and crowds and restaurants—Regent Street.... Thence into a concourse and

out of it—out of the mass of people and motors and omnibuses, loading and unloading, stopping and starting, ladies in evening-clothes and officers accompanying them, flower-sellers and placarded newsvendors—out of all this into a statelier quiet.

The street descended at a slight grade, giving a clear view of the building which ended it. Although Dick saw this building in the actual for the first time, yet its outline was familiar; for all his life had he not dreamed of battlements and a crenellated roof with the pair of towers supporting a great clock and rising against a silver sky.....? He watched it, fascinated..... Half-way down the street, the taxi swung sharply aside into an alley, thence again at right angles into a second narrow alley, and stopped.

Dick got out. The street was retired, discreet, empty. On one side was a series of houses with iron balconies and polished knockers; on the other, a large, heavy dark building, which looked, to his inexperienced eyes, like an institution. While he was peering in hesitation at the two door bells on this huge portal, the taxi driver had touched one of them and the door was opened by a man-servant.

The man-servant addressed Richard by name before he had even spoken:

“Mr. Monkton, sir? Yes, you are expected—this way!” In an instant, the cab was gone and the bags and the traveller were standing in the hall.

Not brightly lighted, the hall gave a chilling



effect of space. A vast, carven staircase sprang up from it in a series of bold flights. Dick found himself following the man-servant up and up. At the stairhead they emerged upon a smaller hall or antechamber, oblong in shape and with a floor patterned in colored marbles. There was little furniture but what there was deserved notice....an eighteenth century mantelpiece, a pair of mirrors, a painted cassone, a Chinese rug or two in yellow and indigo. The doors were finely carved walnut; the pictures had individual lights under each.

This antechamber was absolutely silent. Four doors gave upon it, much as on a stage—two, facing him, one on each side of the fireplace; the two others, one on the right wall and one on the left.... The man-servant, who moved with deliberation, set down the luggage and knocked at the left-hand door. In response to an inaudible request, he stood aside, holding the door open for Dick to pass through. A glow from the room within seemed to suffuse the whole hall.



## CHAPTER III

### THE APARTMENT IN THE GALLERY

**D**ICK'S first impression was that he had stepped into the heart of a golden sunset. The room was a long oblong, with three French windows on one wall and a fire-place facing them on the wall opposite. The whole formed one end of a long gallery which had originally stretched across the front of the building. All the coloring of this room was golden, ranging from the clear tone of many lamps, from the soft hue of curtains and coverings, to deeper notes of wood-brown and the crimson of the coal fire. Bulbs of brighter gold on the walls were reflected from the rich objects standing about or from the bindings in tall cases. The walls themselves were panelled in walnut, shining like glossy, watered silk and studded with a dozen pictures. The place was full, yet not crowded; it yielded the newcomer an impression of the utmost luxury. By the soft light, a touch of perfume in the air from groups of flowers, and a welcome warmth after the night-chill, the guest was soothed and enfolded. Bewildered, he paused uncertainly, just within

the threshold, long enough to see that the one occupant of the room was seated in a big, leather chair facing the door, under a tall, standard lamp. Perhaps the host deliberately maintained this quiescent position long enough to gain some effect from the man who stood hesitating, yet responsive, in the doorway. Now, however, he rose swiftly and came forward with a smile and an extended hand.

"My dear young friend!" he said, "you are welcome indeed.. Monkton's son....welcome indeed....sit down."

The voice was unbelievably sweet.... caressing in its lingering note of an unfamiliar and individual timbre. It was not the least of Charles Ventris's powers to charm; and the visitor could not but yield to it at once. The sound of this welcoming voice, he thought, was golden like the room. He was patted into a chair, where he sank with a sigh of enjoyment, and when he looked at his host with a smile, he saw it reflected.

For a moment, in a frank pause, they surveyed one another. What the elder saw, Sir John Flippin had seen, only that the place, the moment, the atmosphere, relaxed the young American's expression into one sensitively genial and alight with pleasure. As for Richard, he beheld a tall, smiling man, with grey hair and a pale, clear-cut regularly modelled face, which was traced with a few benevolent wrinkles. The mouth was wide, narrow-lipped, delicate. He had dignity and repression of manner, but, when he used his white, long hands in gesture, he did so with au-



thority and effect. The personality struck Richard as having that studied and heightened quality which one associates with the stage—but he was to learn that such personalities are not infrequent in the Older World. Casting about for comparisons, he could only think vaguely of aristocrats and artists, yet somehow this Mr. Ventriss was too vital for an aristocrat and too poised and complex for an artist. Dick then and there evolved a theory which was not far from being the right one: viz., that Charles Ventriss was exotic and distinguished because his life was spent among surroundings that were exotic and distinguished, and that he was intense because he was a man of one idea. Meanwhile he had fixed upon the stranger a pair of young, brilliant black eyes; eyes at once penetrating and kindly; and all the while, in his clear, strange voice he was asking little, unimportant questions about the voyage and the landing.

“Your cablegram delighted me,” he avowed, leaning easily back in his chair and placing his finger-tips together. “I looked forward to your coming....and, my dear lad, you *do* resemble your father! It all comes over me as if it were yesterday—though when I last saw him, he was bearded, as was then the mode.”

“Yes....Dad always said I was a regular Monkton.”

“A regular Monkton, indeed,” the other repeated with a meditative inflection, and for an instant his mind seemed to move away from Dick into the past. But he looked up alertly at the young man’s next words:



"....What a wonderful room!....you must show me your treasures. I love such things. I'm like Dad in *that* as well."

"Surely, surely!" Mr. Ventris replied, looking pleased: "but we shall have plenty of time for that—and for other things. I shall have more to show you than is in this room, you know." He paused to ask, just as Sir John had done, only more solemnly:

"Have you ever heard of Shank?"

Richard answered promptly: "For the first time last night."

Mr. Ventris looked surprised. "How do you mean, last night?"

Richard explained: although, in this soothing atmosphere, he recalled his late suspicions and doubts with a discomfiture which made him, perhaps, a trifle disingenuous in this explanation. He had fallen into talk with a friendly ship-companion was therefore all that Mr. Ventris learned, and he paid it close attention. For the moment, the current of his talk was changed; for he began at once again on the subject of Mr. Monkton the elder and his collections.

"His special interest when I knew him was in furniture and porcelain....he must have had some fine pieces.... Did they sell well?" Dick swallowed hard and shook his head; the other made a sympathetic sound in his throat....

"Too bad! Here too, the markets were very poor at that time. You were in France when your father died, you said, I remember, so you had no final speech with him—just at the end?"

A strange thing—an intimate thing to ask, Dick thought with a sensitive pang; but perhaps over here codes were different. He answered it, and several similar questions, and then, judging the other wished to recall his old friend, he told him a good deal about Dad and their last years together, and the cataclysm, to that quiet existence, of the War. But after a little, Richard could not help feeling that Mr. Ventris, politely as he listened, did not seem really much interested in Dad. He was a trifle distraught and his interruptions were not quite relevant—as when once he asked: “Your mother, I think, died when you were six or seven, did she not?” and a second time turned the pause by observing:

“I suppose you’ve had the usual gentleman’s education over there? A school? An university?”

Richard was again made self-conscious, although he could very well imagine reasons for asking such questions, yet he did not find them easy to answer, save by mere “Yes” or “No.” He kept expecting that Mr. Ventris would vouchsafe something concerning his invitation, his summons thither—some reason for it—but his host never came near the subject at all. At length he ventured to approach it himself:

“Naturally your letter was a great surprise. That sort of chance doesn’t often come to one, except in a novel. I know, of course, that there must be a reason—”

The quiet man-servant was in the room again. He addressed his master: “Mr. Coles is downstairs again, sir.”



"Who?"

"Mr. Coles, sir. He asks to see you."

"I cannot see him now—I am particularly engaged. What does he want?"

"He wished to know if you have anything for him, sir.... and if the young gentleman has arrived?"

Mr. Ventris seemed put out; he thought before replying. During the pause, the man-servant looked over Dick's head at the wall.

"You may tell him I will see him tomorrow—and that Mr. Monkton came about an hour ago...."

The man withdrew and Mr. Ventris turned toward Dick with a gesture—"An old retainer—very tiresome," he murmured. "You were saying—?"

But it was hard to go back to just what Richard was saying, particularly when his host launched at once into a delightful description of London life and pleasures—talk about auction-sales and museums, about Clubs and collectors, full of color and vivacity and point. This he broke off only to glance at his watch.

"And here it wants but half-an-hour to dinner—how inconsiderate of me! You shall go to your room at once. Here is Andrews most *à propos*...."

The butler brought a letter. Mr. Ventris read it with raised eyebrows and made no comment. This was no moment to demand explanations—but rather to bask in his warmth of hospitality.... Richard followed Andrews.



His bed-room was behind one of the doors he had noticed opening from the central antechamber. It was comfortable, and carefully beautiful, perhaps he thought it a little unmanly. The windows, he had but time to notice, looked out upon a large, vague open space which suggested a garden. Surely a very large garden for a city? Dick would like to have observed it, but feared to be late. He dressed quickly, and with a renewed sense of romantic possibility and enjoyment of things, with an altogether new confidence, he rejoined Mr. Ventriss and they went in to dinner.

Served in a room exactly across the hall from the sitting-room, of the same size and shape but glowing with tones of blue instead of gold—this dinner was wonderful. The food was almost as much a work of art as the glass and porcelain, and there was wine of a quality quite beyond the American's experience. He felt almost at ease—talked freely. The elder listened, with his fine, colorless face attentive; or asked adroit questions. Always the replies pleased him. Once, however, he broke out in astonishment, when Dick innocently referred to the building as "the apartment house."

"My dear boy!" he ejaculated, as if shocked, "this is Monkton House!" then, seeing Dick's puzzled look: "This is the town residence of the Monkton family. Sir Piers had the gallery altered, as you see it now, into a little home for me. On account of the estate and the collections and so on, I have to be much in London, whereas

he rarely came up himself, preferring to stay at Shank."

He proffered this explanation with such seriousness and seemed to think it so important, that Dick became aware that, with all his charm of speech, Mr. Ventris was apparently somewhat deficient in a sense of humor. This was confirmed later. Mr. Ventris had cynicism and picturesqueness of outlook in his talk; he said small, pointed things with inimitable grace; he smiled a good deal and summoned others to smile; but he didn't laugh. Possessed as he was by the consciousness of the Monktons and their affairs and their belongings, one often came into contact, under his man of the world polish, with an intensity that amounted to passion. Dick found this strange now; later, it seemed natural. Mr. Ventris fulfilled his personality completely; and he showed this immediately by launching, during dinner, into an eloquent account of the Monktons and of Shank. His eyes glowed; he could not permit his guest to remain for an instant unappreciative of these matters.

Richard listened, almost indulgently. Meanwhile he felt that Sir John Flippin was perfectly right—it was going to be a wonderful experience. Perhaps it was a little strange Mr. Ventris should be so evasive; but, barring this Dick was beginning to think his host one of the most fascinating people that he had ever met.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE EYES BEHIND THE SCREEN

**A**N hour later, he was still of the same mind. By this time they were back in the library and Mr. Ventris was showing his guest some specimens of fine 17th century binding. "These are nothing—nothing!" he waved them aside, "You should see them at Shank. You *will* see them. We are to run down there in a few days—after we finish here. Lady Monkton is expecting us."

Finish what? Dick wondered. He ventured: "The family was originally connected with ours then? Is that why—?"

"Your father belonged to the cadet branch of the Monktons of Shank. A son of the house emigrated to the States at the beginning of the 18th century," said Mr. Ventris, precisely closing the cabinet and moving on to the next case. "It was the name, of course, that first attracted my attention—congeniality of taste confirmed it. Do you share his love of miniatures? Let me show you—"

The Breviary which he laid in Richard's



hands was a piece of tiny perfection. Their two heads bent over it.

"It is one of fifteen belonging to Margaret of Brittany,—all bound in satin. The miniatures are by Orderico, the friend of Giotto. And look at this."

He drew forth a large volume, with clasps of pierced and wroughten silver, at which Dick glanced in amazement.

"Dad's Virgil!"

"You recognize it?"

"You were the buyer, then?"

"Yes. I sent over to the sale and secured it. Did you not know that he bought it from me in the first place, twenty-four years ago? In my letter to you—"

"Yes, I remember; I am glad. There's a picture in it," Dick said, "that I always loved—Dido parting from Æneas in the loveliest garden....! There's real feeling—genius, in that picture."

"I don't recall it," his host answered, but he smiled at the other's enthusiasm and his eyes were bright under their white lids. He watched Richard thus, still smiling.... until the Virgil had been closed and replaced.

Suddenly, Dick felt tired. The sight of the familiar binding brought with it a wave of homesickness. He moved away from the bookcase and the elder fell in with his mood. They resumed their chairs by the hearth and Dick was glad to rest and turn his mind to the suave conversation of his host. That warm, golden glow again enfolded him and yet the troubling beauty

of the room held a certain uneasiness hard to define. The tall man opposite bent half-hidden eyes on him and seemed, in his dignified masculine beauty, also a work of studied and polished art, suited to such a background. One had to get used to it. Delightful though it was, there was a little strain perhaps.... What a peculiar experience—and nothing at all said so far about *why* he had been sent for!

Probably that would come out tomorrow. Meanwhile, because he was weary of these new sensations, Dick laid back his head and began idly to examine the objects spread around him in the sumptuous room. Next the hearth, behind his host, a tall Italian cabinet opened doors enriched with an inlay of ivory and thin slabs of opal. Upon it a Chinese jewelled tree sprouted from a porcelain bowl into a foliage of jade with fruit of amber. The tall lamp shone upon these golden blossoms. How very beautiful!.... Idly, Dick began to follow object after object, his mind carving a phrase about each.... The delicious voice of Mr. Ventriss began to seem far away.... but his eyes, clear and kind and brilliant, gleamed like points of light.... One mustn't fall asleep; so Richard began to enumerate:

Beyond the cabinet, an Eros, resting, in apple-green bronze....

A black-figured cyclops, circled with a dance of maenads.....

A crystal Kwannon, carved as from a piece of ice. Next it, a lapis tazza, supported by a gold standard....



Six small bowls of Canton enamel, with tiny, bright flowers, like the borders of a Persian rug....

A ceremonial robe of orange, with silver flowers, blue bats and mauve butterflies, spread as background to an ivory triptych, crowded with a crucifixion....

Then, a shrine of sculptured and scarlet lacquer, painted and gilt, in honor of a subtle-faced Buddha, whose long, strange fingers were lifted, invoking peace.....

This brought him to a corner of the room, by a tall, pierced screen. As his gaze reached it, Dick's heart began to pound his side. *Someone was standing behind that screen and staring at him....*

With every instinct alert, he turned his gaze, not too quickly, back to his host's face.... He heard his own voice, polite, steady, and he heard the other launch on an exposition in reply. Again he looked back to the corner by the screen. Yes: there was no doubt at all.... someone stood there in the angle, immobile, yet alive, and with eyeballs that moved and shone. He could see nothing more—the figure was tall and dark: it seemed to wear a hood or cowl....it was breathlessly still, now that his gaze was on it—and this stillness seemed sinister. Should he speak of it?—he must speak of it!—No, he could not. As he sat in his chair, the consciousness of being spied upon was so strong, so unpleasant, that Dick closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, his host had risen and was looking down upon him in concern.



"How remiss of me! You must be tired out—my dear boy, you should have said so long ago—" Mr. Ventris was saying, and Dick found himself stammering a protest but caught in this hospitable current and carried to his room.... Surely, he could not speak now of what he had just seen. He glanced at the screen—the eyes were gone. Perhaps he had fallen asleep—perhaps he had dreamed....? But once the bedroom door had closed upon him, once he was alone, Dick was filled with the absolute certainty that he had *not* fallen asleep, that the spying eyes, the shrouded figure, were real, were not a dream.

In his room was silence: not a sound from the city streets seemed to pierce to it. He went to a window, opened the pane, leaned out. As he had supposed, there lay below, a large, quadrangular space of garden, enclosed in high walls, with vague clumps of shrubbery and paths among them.

The distant murmur was London.... What was wrong with this place, anyhow? What did it all mean? At moments, recalling his host's graciousness, Dick blamed his own nerves, telling himself that it was just imagination—for what could be wrong?—and all the while not believing.... Then he would recall that host's strange evasiveness; the spy set to watch him from behind the screen. No: this couldn't be imagination or nervousness only. There *was* tension in the atmosphere; an odd excitement underlay the tranquillity of this reception; these

things were real. Sir John Flippin had been puzzled; something important was hidden; his instincts, sharpened perhaps from strain, spoke unmistakably against them—spoke a warning. He looked at his watch; it marked a late hour, and, though he had never felt further from sleep in his life, yet he turned mechanically to look for his night things. There stood his big bag: but where was the smaller suit-case? He recalled seeing it lifted out of the cab: perhaps it had been forgotten, left in the hall below. He opened his room door quietly—the mere fact of this small, concrete action gave him diversion and relief.

As Dick crossed the hall and went down the stairs he was struck afresh by the silence of the place—not the sound of a voice anywhere, nor the stir of a movement. All the lights glowed softly over the beautiful objects; and this background seemed empty—expectant.... Reaching the lower hall, young Monkton looked about and soon espied the missing bag, standing overlooked in a corner. Now that he had found it, he felt somehow reluctant to climb those long stairs again to his bed-room; he was still alert, tense, uneasy; he stood hesitating....

The hall was vast, sparsely furnished and dimly lit. One wall was occupied by the main portal, the other held a smaller door, which must, Dick judged, give access to the garden. The sight of it gave him a sudden longing to move about in fresher air. A turn or two in the garden-paths would steady his nerves and rid him of this foolish oppression. He set down his bag again, turned back the bolt and slipped out.



Strange place this for the heart of a big city! Before him stretched a good-sized garden, walled all about, with dark hedges growing against the walls; with trees and bushes in the centre and a flagged walk surrounding them. Here and there stood statues. Across one end rose the bulk of the house, in stately grandeur, unlit and silent. A palish sky bent overhead with a few, faint stars: against the horizon a tower rose. Very distant came the roll of traffic. The spring night felt damp and fresh. . . . The place was of a kind new to Dick's experience, and he looked about him with interest and curiosity which for the moment overlay his disquiet. He walked down the path, between the shrubbery and the wall, till he reached the end of the garden, then turned and began to walk toward the house again. . . .

Thinking over the events of the night, Dick was not able to remember whether he heard the voices first, or saw the light. The latter brought him to a standstill because of its strangeness. What he noticed first was just an oval, white patch, lying on the path, some distance away from where he stood and nearer to the house. . . . This patch was made by a shifting spot of light, not remarkably bright, but definitely the light of a lantern. The odd thing was that he couldn't see where it came from. It moved, however, moved in his direction, shakily but steadily progressing; and with it came, faint and indistinct but growing louder, the sound of voices. The light skipped about capriciously on



the flags—now hidden, now clear, until Dick suddenly realized—. That garden wall which rose on his left hand to a height of ten feet or so, was by no means solid; on the contrary, it was hollow; and before the open space hedges had been planted which hid that fact, and which, by night at least, gave an illusory impression of solidity. There had been in this wall a shallow, cloistered walk, whose openings were cunningly hidden by the growth of a hedge concealing this walk from view of one standing in the garden, and which might have remained concealed, only that now, within that cloistered passage, someone was walking with a lantern, whose rays pierced through chance holes in the hedge to shine at intervals upon the path....

Instinct, the same which had kept Dick silent when the spying eyes had rested on him in that golden room, kept him silent now. He stepped into the projecting shadow of a neighboring bush. There he watched the light draw nearer, rest on the flags at his feet, flicker past. An interchange of low talk accompanied it: the inflections seemed foreign to his ear....he caught no words, but once he thought there was subdued, soft laughter. The voices, the light, passed his bush and went on down toward the bottom of the garden. Would they return? To the impulse which suddenly overmastered the young man, several obscure forces contributed and reason played no part whatever. His own strain, the uncertainty of his future, the unfamiliarity of scene and of atmosphere, the subtle, warning

under-current, the baffling insult of all these mysteries—all united into action. Mentally this impulse took definite shape—that, come what may, he would not sleep in that place. Absurd, unreasonable, rude, ungrateful—oh, no doubt all these and more!....yet he could not sleep under this roof. There was no more to it than just that. He was—rather to his own surprise—quite decided, quite collected. His mind moved straight and steadily on an indicated path....

For some moments, the light had vanished, the garden was relieved of it and the shrubs breathed and stirred in the night wind. It was growing very late....

And then, far down the path, Dick beheld the wavering light once more approaching him. Not an instant did he linger.... He had left the door ajar and in three strides, or so it seemed, regained the hall. Still the light burned on in that sinister quiet. He picked up his bag; studied the complicated bolts of the front-door, had it open in a few seconds; and let himself out into the street.....

## CHAPTER V

### DIFFERENT BY DAY-LIGHT

**T**HERE is no revelation more unpleasant than that of the power of our own nerves. Sooner or later it comes to all, and to youth it is often the first breach in the armour of self-confidence. The "How can I have done that?" expressed in one's bewilderment, is a realization that man is not captain of his soul unless he receive promotion on the field of battle. Dick Monkton, as he sat down next morning to breakfast, simply could not believe in his own incredible behavior of the night before.

Till morning came, he did not taste the full, unpleasant savor of this consciousness. At the time, impulse possessed him and shut the door of his mind. Under the benediction of the Palace clock, St. James's, dignified and tranquil, had seemed a refuge; still more of a refuge was the cab which carried him to a dingy station hotel. In his room there and almost at once, he had been overcome with heavy sleep. With the awakening, came an intolerable sensation; and he looked



suddenly upon himself as though set free from the power of some evil spell.

He, Richard Monkton, had run away from a host who had welcomed him with kindness and whose money was still in his pocket....! Such an action was impossible. As he tried to eat, he choked over the memory.... Well, this at least settled the affair for good and all. No doubt now what he must do, since the evil spell was broken. He would seek out Sir John Flippin and leave in his charge the balance of Mr. Ventris's money for transmission to the owner. He must follow this by arranging immediately to draw the remainder from the few hundreds which were still lying to his credit in the bank at home, and place them in the same hands to repay the sum in full. Then, if there was no chance of any sort of work in England—and for a time at least, he would rather stay on—probably he could get home by taking a job as a stoker. Lots of fellows had done it....

The coffee-room, wherein Dick came to these desperate resolutions, was crowded and stuffy and frowsy—only it was not noisy. Voices on the whole were low-pitched: one could think in quiet. A beefy-faced waitress, who served him with unattractive food, thought he had very little bounce. She preferred the livelier gentlemen from Birmingham or Bradford, and she sniffed at the sixpence which he gave her as unworthy of an American. He was "sort of palish-like" she thought; and her eyes followed his tall figure as it walked out, quite unseeing. Monkton, in

point of fact, was absorbed in the unbearable awareness of himself, caused by his last night's impulse, and was just in the frame of mind to yield to impulses equally rash....

So it happened that Sir John Flippin, turning to his desk for a quiet hour before setting out for chambers, was surprised to receive a visit from his late shipboard acquaintance, who, with small, excited gestures and young eyes full of trouble, proceeded to pour out to him an incoherent and fantastic story. One would have laughed, if the face before one had not worn a look so miserable.....

To Dick, Sir John seemed ruddier, bulkier, more common-sensical than ever, as he sat with pursed mouth in his big, leather chair. He had been a great horseman, had Sir John, in his youth; he was said to have the lightest hand on the bit of anyone in the county. He handled Richard now as though he had been a nervous horse, in a manner at once both disciplinary and soothing.

"But, my dear young friend,.....my dear lad, if you will permit me," he repeated, patting the arm of the chair into which he had all but forced his restless visitor; "there has been a misunderstanding—surely nothing like so serious as you think and capable of the simplest explanation. Ventris, I thought I'd forewarned you, is a trifle melodramatic by temperament—artistic, you know, and all that sort of thing—and not incapable of a *coup de théâtre*, as I know very well. It's dull of him not to see that you are hardly the person—"



Richard broke eagerly in. "It's not Mr. Ventris that worries me today," he cried and was out of his chair in an instant, "but me, myself—my amazing return for what was nothing but kindness.... I've not come to complain of him—though I don't understand.... No, no.... Here's what remains of the £100 he sent me, and I'm going at once to cable home and have the balance sent direct—if you will arrange to tell him. He won't want to see me again—and no wonder!"

Sir John, watching the speaker, silently noticed the excess of the same characteristics which he had observed in their first talk—and thought it well merely to nod acquiescence. Richard sat down again, feeling a little absurd.

"And after that, what do you propose to do?" was the lawyer's question, and Dick raised his thin shoulders. "I shall decide that later," he replied, with a shy hauteur; "go home, I suppose."

There fell a pause after this brave answer. Sir John let the bank-notes lie on the table where Dick had laid them. With his eye on a corner of the ceiling, he seemed to reflect in a space of trying deliberation, which Dick, however impatient, felt he ought not to interrupt.

"You are a hasty—an impetuous young man, in my opinion," was Sir John's authoritative utterance, after some minutes. "You make much of the money obligation; yes, more," he emphatically repeated as the other started to protest, "than I think justified at this stage.... You



mustn't be flighty, my lad. I know Charles Ventris—he is not quixotic. I have read him heretofore as a man of one idea. Shall I confess to you that your story of night before last did not cause me to alter this opinion? It is stupid of Ventris not to be frank with you—because there is more under all this, I feel sure, than meets the eye.”

“Maybe,” Dick persisted—“but that’s not my affair. This money....”

“You don’t take my point. Let us be blunt. How if this money be no gift, but a discharged debt—or, if you like it best, conscience money? His letter spoke, if I have not forgotten, of some obligation—? Oh, I may sound cryptic, but I have my reasons!”

This new idea brought a faint color into Richard’s cheeks and he stared at Sir John.

“You mean,” he hesitated, “that Ventris and my father....?”

“I mean,” said the barrister with formidable emphasis, “that you should open your mind.... Charles Ventris has all his life lived in the expert’s world—a narrow, but a fascinating place to dwell. He has lived there, as it were, on his wits, and they have done him pretty well—to all appearances. Who can say what he has owed to other men’s brains—or what engagement he’s now tardily recognizing? Your father’s death—may it not have raised that obligation?”

“I see. You think that would account for his silence about it?”

“Quite so. It accounts much better than your idea of a caprice of generosity.” Sir John had

begun to use toward Richard a manner suggesting that the affair had passed out of the latter's hands into his own. He went on in his legal, rotund accents: "In my experience, a person with one idea does not act without reference, sooner or later, to that dominating idea. Here we are to look for an explanation of this puzzling occurrence...."

"Yes—but meanwhile, I cannot—"

"We shall set to work to find out all about this in the most direct and simplest way; we shall ask Charles Ventris to explain." He looked at Dick and Dick saw the unspoken additional query and reluctantly answered it.

"You are wondering why I didn't ask him last night—when I saw the spy behind the screen—why I didn't speak out?"

"I am rather," said the lawyer composedly.

"I've asked myself a hundred times since—but I don't know! I couldn't seem to.... He was charming—but so strange, and the room so beautiful—" His voice trailed wretchedly off in a murmur, and Sir John, putting his lips together, said: "Very interesting, that!" to himself. Aloud, with a weighty gesture, he simply continued his decisive directions: "Well, I have determined that until we know more, you shall not commit yourself. You are in my hands." He spoke with continued sympathy, but with a finality that admitted of no protest. "The day is going to be fine—forget your problem and see all you may of this wonderful city. Return here—at, shall we say, five? By tea-time, I fancy, we



shall be able to set your mind at rest both as to the past and the future."

Sir John Flippin rose; it was evident that he considered the interview at an end. Richard therefore could not delay to take leave and soon found himself upon the pavement of Sloane Street. As he glanced back at the small, comfortable house, with its blossoming window-boxes, and recalled the well-lighted, book-lined study, Richard had to admit that London was a wonderful city for old bachelors....!

Left to himself, Sir John stretched out his hand for the telephone; then, thinking better of it, wrote the following note instead.

"Sloane Street, April 17.

"DEAR VENTRIS:

"Your late guest, the American boy, has been here in great trouble of mind. We made friends on shipboard and he has confided in me. No doubt you have noticed the effects of nervous strain in him—the combined results of war-service, of his father's sudden death, and of the painful financial situation which that death discovered. A little tragedy, but poignant: and quite enough to cause his rather impulsive desertion of your roof last night. He seems simply to have experienced an overmastering distrust; and you must forgive the lad, because now that he has come to his senses, his own conduct seems to him intolerable.....

"Some touch of mystery; some lack of frankness in yourself; with certain strange appearances, which his nerves no doubt exaggerated, made him bolt, as it were, for the stable... I've seen colts do it who became steady hunters in time.....This morning, the repayment of your loan is his chief concern. Can you drop in here about five? I like the lad.....and wish to see matters set right, if I may."



This letter despatched by messenger, the barrister betook himself, later than he liked, to the Temple; where some hours passed before a reply was handed him.

“Your letter greatly relieved my mind, my dear Flippin.. “What a fortunate chance you had met my young friend! Of course I stand ready to forget the incident and even to admit that I should have been more open with him from the beginning. But momentous issues hung upon our interview: nor did I expect to find one so independent.....I know little of American youth. At five expect me; when I shall explain myself—although I warn you, my dear Flippin, that this explanation will greatly astonish you.”

“Yours sincerely,

“C. VENTRIS.”

Sunshine lay still on Sloane Street when Richard returned there. He had spent a curious day. On the tops of 'buses swaying through twisting streets; eating a sandwich at the Cheshire Cheese; poking about the grim, small precincts of the Tower; resting in reverent quiet among the dusky splendors of the Abbey—and all the while, projected, mind and spirit alike, toward that crucial hour of five in the afternoon. He did not wholly believe Sir John's theory although he wanted to believe it.... His imagination retained the bizarre thrill of that rich and studied room—where someone watched and spied on him with bright eyes, from behind a screen.... He tried reasonably to account for such an incident ....and reasonably could not do so without pre-supposing that the spy stood there with his host's knowledge.... Moreover, in Mr. Ven-

'tris's manner, there had been (it seemed clearer in recollection) a significant undercurrent. His eyes had gleamed as they rested on his guest.... And why? Sir John's suggestion accounted only for Dick's invitation, for his reception: for in the more fantastic incidents of the evening, Sir John expressed polite evasion, if not disbelief....

Therefore, Dick, in his wanderings about London, that most romantic of cities, began to feel like a hero of the Arabian Nights. In London everything seemed natural; London seemed to keep its own secrets, seven million secrets. Dick told himself not to get excited, and to look well upon England because it was more than likely that his hours there were numbered. Adventure knocks twice at few men's doors.... The coming interview, with its painful mortifications, must be supported with manliness, and then farewell!.... Yet always there was an imp of perverse youth within him who kept whispering that the adventure might be only just about to begin....

The young 'American's manner, although still tense and concentrated, was quite composed when he was once more ushered into the barrister's study. Here he found two men engaged in the closest conversation. Sir John, frowningly absorbed, his great hand playing with his eyeglasses, his rather careless dress reminiscent of a sporting youth, formed a striking contrast to the more exquisite figure of Mr. Ventris. If Dick had prepared to meet with a cold reception in that quarter, he had also prepared a



mood of humility. This was not needed. As he entered, the other, springing lightly up, came forward with hand outstretched and a face marked only with concern.

"Monkton, my dear chap! Why did you not come to me at once? Oh, not a word! It's my fault entirely—yet excusable, as you shall hear . . . I admit, I wasn't as frank as I should have been—" His black eyes sought the other's face with anxious sympathy—"But what's all this about a light in the garden and a hidden spy? Of course you know you must have dreamed?"

Dick said something; his relief was enormous. Under the influence of this cordial charm, he began to assure himself he *had* dreamed. Everything was so different. This homely study, with pipe-ashes all over the hearth, its desk piled with briefs, its faded curtains—seemed to cast a dream-like unreality over the golden glow of last night's memory. Evidently his imagination must have run away with him. Everything is different by daylight. . . . How kind these people were! . . . But Sir John was speaking.

"All that is of no importance now. What Ventris has to tell you, my dear lad, simply alters everything. . . . Sit down."

Richard obeyed, wondering. The barrister's tone was portentous. . . . Dick glanced from one to the other nervously. He observed that Mr. Ventris, who was a very tense man, was paying no attention to himself but directing his words entirely to the K. C., beginning slowly, ending in a rush. . . .



“As I was telling you, Flippin, when Monkton was announced, I have reasons, convincing reasons, to think—nay, that I do solemnly believe this young man to be none other than the only son of Sir Piers Monkton and therefore the present legal inheritor of Shank.”

## CHAPTER VI

### THE WHITE FUR RUG

**S**TUPEFACTION fell upon Dick at this monstrous statement. Now he knew what the matter was—the man was mad! He looked across at the barrister, but Sir John, with his lower lip thrust out, was the picture of attentive gravity. The manner of Mr. Ventriss was calm but underlain with triumph. Neither looked at Dick, who had given utterance to a sort of shout. It was as if he had not spoken and the conversation continued for some moments between the two Englishmen exactly as if the American had not been present.

“I repeat, Ventriss, your idea is the wildest romance. The child was drowned. That poor young creature drowned her child.”

“May I point out, Sir John, that the infant’s body was never found?”

“Surely you are, you must be, in error. Did not Lucy Monkton—?”

“The body of Lucy Monkton was taken from the Thames. Her child was never found. We thought that natural at the time. For twenty-

three years I supposed the heir to have perished with his mother. I now know him to be living—to be sitting in this room.” Mr. Ventris spoke with a solemnity that turned Richard cold.

“But how came such an idea into your head—? By Jove, Ventris, you know—what you are saying is no light matter....! You must have proofs—or what you think are proofs—?”

“Quite so, Sir John,—one moment! You remember the date of Lady Monkton’s death, do you not?”

“The autumn of 1896, if I remember. I was shootin’ somewhere—it made a great talk at the time.”

“October 27th, 1896, was the last day on which the poor lady was seen alive. The boy was nearly two months old.... She took him from his nursery one wet night. There had been a painful scene with Sir Piers a few hours before. All we knew was that she took the up-train at nine o’clock, leaving behind her a note stating that her purpose was to remove herself and her infant for ever. A wild—a particularly unbalanced letter....”

The speaker let his voice fall into a melancholy music and shook his head sadly.

“You were away, Ventris, if my memory holds?”

“I was in Paris. It was the year of the great sale.... We were fortunate in securing for Shank an incomparable Horae from the collection of Philip of Cleves, with a jewelled reliquary set into the binding. To obtain it I disposed of



two Homilies from the library of St. Augustine and a Psalter, once the property of Mélissande, Countess of Arizon—no doubt you remember—?”

Sir John made a movement of impatience. “I know nothing of such things.... But Lady Monkton—?”

“Was found in the Thames two days later. The child was not found.”

“You tried to trace Lady Monkton’s movements, I assume?”

“Naturally, we tried but without success. She had been seen to take a ’bus—very cunningly, she did not take a cab. All trace of her was lost. We can only suppose that she committed suicide that same night or early morning.”

“And you yourself believed in the child’s death—or did you suspect anything?”

“I believed it—how should I do other than believe it? Monkton believed it: when I hastened home to him, he showed me the letter—there was no question in his mind, none in mine. None until two months ago.”

“And then?”

For the first time, the narrator shifted his position slightly, so that he should include the younger man—who sat stiffly, eyes fixed upon him—in his audience. The room was quiet in the afternoon sunlight. In the window, a little cloud moved across the blue sky: Richard kept his eye on it. He was oddly conscious of struggling to decide which feeling in him was uppermost, excited incredulity or a sort of anger....

"A fortnight or more after Sir Piers' death," began Mr. Ventris with impressive clarity and directness, "some letters were brought to me. They were letters written by a woman who had been Lucy Monkton's personal maid, to her young niece. The niece had respected the confidence reposed in her—but she kept the letters. During the intervening twenty years, she married and then died. The letters fell into her husband's hands; it was the husband who brought them to me. He was an attorney's clerk in a small town and had enough education to guess what they meant."

"His object, of course, was money?"

"His object was frankly money. He would, of course, have taken them to Lycett Monkton, but Lycett Monkton was out of the country."

Noticing the speaker did not say, "Sir Lycett," Sir John could not but be impressed. He waved Ventris to proceed.

"Before telling you the contents of these letters, I should like to ask our young friend some questions?"

"By all means."

Mr. Ventris turned to Richard and asked:

"When and where were you born?"

Dick replied with slow reluctance: "August 18th, 1896; I think it was near London."

"Your parents were travellers or residents?"

"Dad told me they went immediately abroad on their marriage, intending to stay for some time. They lived in Italy and in France and finally in England; on the whole, for nearly eighteen months."



"When did they return to the States?"

"About the first of December, I think. Dad said I was home for my first Christmas."

"But surely you know more definitely than this?" Sir John struck in.

"No, no! It must seem strange, but I know little! Who was to tell me? You see Dad never talked about it—and my mother died when I was six years old. I was too little to ask her." He drew a breath, and suddenly began to pour forth his protest with a vehemence which somehow surprised Mr. Ventris. There was intensity in the face and voice and in the brief, stiff gestures, which gave an unexpected vigor to the whole figure—"But surely that means nothing! The whole thing is too utterly wild....you didn't know my parents.... And I look exactly like Dad....everyone knows....you said so yourself!"

The other slipped his hand into his pocket and drew forth a morocco case which he opened and handed to Sir John Flippin.

"Will you look at Sir Piers' portrait," he said, "and then at this young man?"

Dick sprang up to look over Sir John's shoulder. The miniature was of a man in his forties, wearing uniform. The face,—even while it was utterly unlike that of the one he called father—yet undoubtedly the shape of it, the angle at which the thin-bridged nose jutted from between the peaked eyebrows, bore marked resemblance to his own.

"A regular Monkton—surely?" Mr. Ventris



was saying, while Sir John under his breath seemed to be humming a tune.

"Interesting, but not convincing, Ventris."

"You think not, Sir John? Then look, I beg of you"—and Ventris' voice rose a note—"look at his gesture now, as he stands there! How many times have you seen Sir Piers wave his left hand just in that way—when he was absorbed in anything—exactly as that boy is doing now!"

"I don't recall ever having noticed," Sir John said.

"I have; many, many times." The other spoke with absolute conviction, and it was this accent of conviction which Dick answered.

"There will have to be more than likeness to make me believe such a fairy-tale, sir. You didn't know Dad as I did. . . . He was incapable of passing me off as his child, if I were not—in-capable of it."

Mr. Ventris very lightly shrugged. "It is well you are not easily carried away, my lad, very well. I did not adduce this likeness as my only proof—but surely it has weight?" He looked across at Sir John.

"Some weight; if added to strong legal evidence: none without."

"Of course; of course." Mr. Ventris dropped into a meditative note. "Let me get back to the facts. . . . I will begin with my own knowledge. I made the acquaintance of a Mr. Richard Monkton of Philadelphia in the October of 1896. We met at Sotheby's: the name and family likeness (though by no means so marked as in this youth)

first attracted my attention. He was very charming and we soon discovered common tastes. Mr. Monkton admired a Virgil in my collection, which he eventually bought from me. We talked much and corresponded. Of course our friendship lay wholly in one groove. I never met my friend's wife, though he often spoke of her, as Americans do.... I ought to add that he did *not* speak of any child."

Sir John inflexibly answered in the pause. "You could not trust your memory after twenty-odd years."

"I think I could.... To my knowledge, Mr. Monkton said nothing of a son. Naturally he wished to see Shank, and I was delighted to please a fellow connoisseur. Sir Piers found my American friend congenial and invited him for the week-end. In the light of after events it would seem that during his visit the lack of harmony between Sir Piers and Lady Monkton was all too plain. There were unbecoming scenes. I am inclined to think that she made some appeal to this tender-hearted guest. You are very patient with the sex in your country."

"Was he beastly to his wife—this Sir Piers?" Thus Dick roughly broke in and Charles Ventris looked shocked.

"Sir Piers beastly? Never. The poor young lady was not strong in the head—her death proves it...."

"She was jealous, I remember," Sir John offered and Mr. Ventris nodded.

"Jealous of Shank, jealous of my friendship for



her husband; jealous (without the faintest cause, believe me) of the present Lady Monkton. But their chief dissension was money. She resented anything being spent for the collections—she took no interest in Shank. She had an empty mind and an unhappy nature. I was very sorry for her.”

For the way he said this, Dick liked him better. His voice paid caressing tribute to her forlorn little ladyship and then resumed more briskly:

“After the boy’s birth in September, she must have become mentally affected. She talked wildly; had delusions of persecution; hinted of poisoning for her child and herself. It was then that Sir Piers was obliged to dismiss her personal maid, a woman named Mary McNeil, (who, her physician thought, unduly excited her mistress) and substitute a calmer attendant.... But that made matters worse and tragedy resulted. It was four days after Mr. Richard Monkton’s week-end at Shank that the poor lady’s mind must finally have given way, and it seemed that this dismissal of McNeil formed a definite grievance on which she brooded.”

The narrator paused an instant, giving Sir John an opportunity.

“You have admirably recalled the past situation, Ventris; but my deplorably legal habit of mind cannot be quite satisfied. I do not wish to cross-examine but it may benefit you in future if I put in a word here. There are two points of main importance. The first is the contents of McNeil’s letters and the evidence they contain.



The second is: are they McNeil's letters? I should wish to have that point settled first."

It struck Richard that this speech annoyed Mr. Ventriss, whose brilliant gaze clouded, but he replied immediately:

"I shall try to satisfy you. The letters are three in number, dated October 28, 30 and November 6, 1896. The man Coles found them among his wife's effects. The fact that she had kept them so carefully aroused his curiosity...."

"Is he a man of probity: well spoken of?"

"He does not impress me one way or the other. His behavior in the matter so far has been proper," Ventriss patiently answered.

"Had his wife given no hint?"

"None he could remember. He met her first some years after the date on these letters and married her in 1907."

"What was his own knowledge of the writer?"

"He never saw the writer. As stated in the last of these letters, Mary McNeil must shortly afterwards have married and left England. The Coles, had evidently lost all trace of her. Coles did not even know her present name."

"H'm....that is unfortunate. The letters therefore are totally unsupported?"

"It depends," said the other with spirit. "At Shank there are plenty of specimens of McNeil's handwriting—she wrote much for her mistress. The place also from which they are written is mentioned as her address in the servants' record at Shank."

"At the time of Lady Monkton's suicide, did

nobody think of Mary McNeil as likely to throw some light on the tragedy?"

"No one until a week after I returned from France, when I suggested doing so. Sir Piers sent someone to her address, who reported that it was a decent house in West Kensington, where McNeil had boarded for perhaps a month. She had left a few days before to get married and they could tell us no more."

"Surely you advertised?"

"No: Lady Monkton was dead. Sir Piers was in no condition of mind to desire further notoriety. With the discovery of his wife's body came a wish for silence and oblivion."

"But the heir, man, the heir!"

"Sir Piers never doubted for an instant that the mother had carried out her purpose."

The sunlight had left the house-tops. Long shadows crept into the room. Mr. Ventriss had taken some folded papers from his wallet and held them in his hand; he waited, rather obviously patient, while Flippin considered then began to speak:

"These three letters are in my safe at home, where you shall examine them. I have here a *précis* of their information, drawn up rather hastily today, for the purpose of this interview. The first—"

"One moment. . . . Have you shown these letters to Scrope?"

"To no one, Sir John. I thought best to await Richard Monkton's arrival before mentioning the matter."



"Quite so. In this first letter then—?"

"The first is short, dated the 28th. The writer says she is upset because of the dreadful events of the previous night. 'My poor lady,' she puts it, appeared with the child at midnight in a state of excitement so violent that McNeil was dreadfully distressed. 'Luckily I got her in quietly,' she writes, and later, 'Thank God, at least nobody knew!' She describes Lady Monkton as insisting that McNeil should take her child to an American friend who, she said, would carry it far off across the sea and away from its enemies. McNeil seems to have promised anything in order to quiet the distracted mother. From the tone of her letter I do not think that at first she regarded the promise as serious. When the letter ends, she has just discovered that Lady Monkton is not in the room where she had persuaded her to go and lie down."

Mr. Ventriss took up another sheet of paper. "The second letter is two days later. Lady Monkton's body had just been taken from the Thames. All of the anxiety which McNeil felt for her lady, was now transferred to herself. She shows that terror of police investigation which one might expect in a person of her class. So far she had managed to conceal the infant by carrying him about with her most of the day. Now she was afraid to keep him longer and she was afraid to give him up."

Mr. Ventriss took up the last sheet. "The letter of November 6 is short. McNeil says that she is to be married that day: they are to leave Eng-



land immediately. She gives the recipient an affectionate good-bye. She adds these words: 'Maybe I did wrong: but what could I do? I promised her poor ladyship faithfully. She was very sweet and kind, the American young lady. Thank God, her husband was away—he might have made trouble....but her eyes were full of tears when I put Master Baby into her arms, wrapped in that little white fur rug, with the wadded blue lining—' ”

The narrator broke off abruptly. In the heavy silence, Dick had got unsteadily to his feet and then sat down again.

“The rug—” he said, catching at broken phrases—“that white fur rug—the torn blue silk lining.... Mother showed it to me that snowy day—that snowy day— She said: ‘I wrapped you in it against the cold—on the voyage, my dear—when you were a little baby—’ ”

With dilated eyes, he stared from one man to the other, then covered his face to shut out Sir John's concentrated frown and Charles Ventris' smile of triumph—to shut it all out. He felt suddenly very ill.

## CHAPTER VII

### GESTURES OF THE WHITE PEACOCK

LADY MONKTON sat in the sunshine on the terrace at Shank. Before her eyes the south front of the Great House, the Tudor front, rose toward the sky with an almost insolent magnificence. On her left hand spread the orangery, the hall of state, the courtyard, whose Triton, rising from a central fountain, blew forever in silence his wreathèd horn.... On her right hand, the library wing and inner buildings merged into a confused mass, from which the silhouette of the chapel defined itself. Behind her stretched the gardens, gallant and gay, enclosed in walls pierced at intervals with gates of iron tracery, flanked with decorative ovals. All this was heaped splendidly before her, forming a broken outline of parapets, towers, and twisted chimneys; a congeries of confused and ancient erections resembling a medieval village, the whole dominated from afar by the frowning bulk of a huge tithe barn.

Often as Lady Monkton gazed on this, the wonder was renewed for her. Whether she saw

it as now, radiant in afternoon light, heraldic unicorns perpetually rearing on the gables, their horns crossed against the zenith; or in early morning looked on the quadrangle, studious and stately, with mullioned windows and garlanded stonework; or saw it at night, mysterious in gleaming moonlight—all enchanted, and breathing triumphant emanations of past glory—the marvel held her....that it should stand thus as it had stood, century after century....

Shank had been both a great ecclesiastical palace and the palace of a great noble. For over four hundred years, nothing, inside or out, had been changed. Since James I., most of the building had been preserved as a museum; housing the collections of paintings, books, furniture, china, and silver; to which each successive owner had added, at the cost almost of ruin. Thus it became a treasure-house such as no king could rival; the unique pride of its lords, who kept a tradition of self-sacrifice for its preservation. No splendid wastrel ever fed his vices from its hoards. Whatever their faults, to add painting to painting, rarity to rarity, had been the Monkton passion, for whose sake they gladly resigned all other passions of men. Thus they lived, retired, secure. Other nobles sought preferment, power, court-influence — the Monktons kept away from London and saw no sovereign unless to act as his host. And as for the other things which men hold dear, the Monkton motto was, "Shank, not rank."

Henry VIII. had presented the original foun-



dation, with its rich Abbey standing in fat, peaceful fields, to a lady he favored but on whom he had scarce time to confer temporary matrimonial honors. Her son, Fitzhenry Monkton, was an enthusiastic antiquarian, the friend of Essex and of Southampton. He also loved pageant and play and had the company down from the Globe more than once to perform in his Great Hall. Of this he had left record in his own hand, and volumes have been written on that special entry, wherein he tells of his pleasure in the conversation of "good Master Burbage and his excellent partner and playwright: a man," he adds, "of the honourablest parts and pregnant wit, but private rather than full."

It was this Monkton's son who refused a peerage, believing that safety lay in obscurity. So indeed it proved: and his descendants continued adroitly to shift their political sympathies in order to safeguard their collections. Puritan cannon never pointed at Shank; no Monkton came who permitted his own wants to cause the loss of as much as a single chair. Thus generation after generation added to their hoards of art, as an Indian rajah adds gem to gem in his treasure vault.

And what hoards were these! The paintings alone were irreplaceable. Shank housed nine Velasquez, as many Holbeins, a remarkable group by Philippe de Champagne, over a dozen of the finest Reynolds, and a picture called the "Great," beside many lesser by Hoppner. The tapestries had belonged to Cosimo de Medici. The porcelain had never been duplicated and

never could be; it filled the vitrines in three ninety-foot galleries. On the wall of the small drawing room hung Leonardo's *Vierge à la Carafe*, for centuries missing from the Vatican and now triumphantly enthroned at Shank. One of the libraries held no book printed later than 1690. The Manuscript Room was the shrine of the famous Monkton Missal and of the *Treyze Saintes Hystoires du Jean de Braq*. The collection of small, intimate objects connected with the past was not yet catalogued, though known to be exceptionally rich. Walking through the State Apartments taught one the meaning of the phrase 'Pomps and Vanities.' In the King's Bedchamber, where none had slept since James I laid his ungainly person beneath the embroidered velvets, there were tables, lamps, firedogs, sconces, ewers, basins,—a complete service of wroughten silver.

All these things were housed in a mansion whose beauty seemed immortal, bidding defiance to Time itself. Preserved by the devotion of its possessors, devotion enduring till it culminated in the veritable passion of the late owner, its towers rose superbly safe—for even the Great War had passed them by.

Spared them for what? This was the dread at the heart of the woman sitting there, the guardian of all that beauty, for Lady Monkton knew that Shank was at that moment menaced by a danger greater than any from German bombs.

She turned her head to look into the garden.



At her feet the turf was like thick fur, but fur with the color of an emerald. It stretched to the bowling green, between tulip trees and circular sycamores, to where the ancient limes were beginning to murmur with bees.... In a few days more, climbing roses would be staining the towers with red. Along the wall above the hedge wandered a white peacock, like some delicate ghost.... Beyond, the garden bloom was beginning, its tone still faint and pure—not yet heightened to the full diapason of midsummer. May lingered in the air and smiled upon Shank. Through the Park the deer were still scattered, not yet seeking the shade of great oaks and beeches. Lady Monkton watched the stag proudly stepping across the grass; and, as they followed him, her eyes grew dreamy.... Very spacious the buildings seemed, and very silent; all human sounds were lost in them. Denise had sat in the warm sun for more than an hour—she was thinking deeply. A woman of marked, if subtle beauty, she faintly resembled the portraits of Mary, Queen of Scots, possibly heightening that resemblance by her widow's dress of white crêpe. She was slender, and her intricately arranged hair was as white as her dress. Her narrow eyes seldom smiled. Her face was far younger than her hair; it was reserved: and these qualities lent her distinction in the eyes of her world. She seemed to have lived so much with the past that she was not like anyone else: seeing her, one thought instinctively of beautiful vanished things. Lady Monkton had knowledge,



but not cleverness, nor did she usually talk very much. The shadow of a lisp in her speech suggested a foreign accent....

While she was still watching the stag, Lady Monkton became aware that Charles Ventris was coming toward her across the terrace. She held out her hands to him.

"Charles?" The word was both question and entreaty, but he did not hasten to reply. He raised her hand to his lips with an old-world deference and loosened himself from his long motor-coat. Then he shook his head.

"No word of Mary McNeil?"

"None. The woman seems to have vanished into thin air. I can find no trace of her after that autumn. I suppose she must be dead."

"Would that—her death, I mean—help or hinder?"

He looked doubtfully....and then in his turn questioned;

"What a heavenly day!.... And Richard, how is he?"

"Better—he gains every hour. But he is very reserved, very quiet, Charles. I think he is bewildered."

"No doubt. Who would not be? How does he strike you?"

"As less unformed—as more of a character, I should say, than I thought: a charming lad, and sensitive to beauty."

"Does he appreciate—all that?" and Mr. Ventris gave a gesture in the direction of the house.

"Yes, I think he does—more at least than I ex-

pected—naturally it overwhelms him, but with love, though not such a love as yours and mine.”

He turned to follow her gaze as it rested on the fastidious gestures of the white peacock, and then they both watched the windows of the Great Hall, glowing response in a fervor of colors to the entering sun rays. His light touch fell sympathetically upon her wrist.

“Such love will come with greater knowledge,” he said and paused. When he spoke again it was upon a harsh note. “Did I ever tell you of my last encounter with Lycett Monkton? It was at the Club, two years ago. Piers had just had that first slight stroke, and of course he knew it. He stopped in front of me, looking down on me from his great height, with such an insolence! ‘So I hear he’s very bad?’ said he. ‘Do you out of a job, I daresay. I warn you, if the stuff ever comes my way, the auction-rooms will be busy! Good money there at Shank, and I mean to have it—no sentimentality about me.... The junk has been there too long—let the Yankees enjoy it and let me enjoy the dollars!’ ” She gave a murmur of horror:

“He would not dare!”

“Those were his words, and he said the same to others.”

“But the law will protect—the entail—?”

“The law could not protect everything—there are ways and ways, and he will come to learn them. It’s the beginning of the end. And now comes this hope.... Yet if I could only learn, Denise, that the Antarctic had ended that man!”



"Yet if you are not certain about Richard—?"

"I am certain—of course I am certain. That poor little fool, it is just the sort of thing she would have done. But these legal gentry are eternally suspicious—as if the letters were not plain proof enough!"

"You talked to Scrope yesterday? Wasn't he impressed?" she enquired with her faint lisp.

"Naturally. But he was strong about my finding McNeil if possible. I pointed out that her disappearance was an additional proof. Why should she disappear unless she had done wrong? He was struck, as I could see, but wishes time, advertising, heaven knows what!"

"The Times printed an account of the voyage of the relief-ship to the Antarctic," Lady Monkton said. "It mentioned the claimant and stated that Monkton would hasten back as soon as found."

"Last week I had a talk with Sir Ambrose Fitchett about that whole Maitland-Monkton Expedition," he told her. "Much was against them in his opinion: equipment, season of year, poor leadership. Maitland, he described as a rash fool, and Monkton as unpopular with the men.... Of course the uncertainty of his whereabouts, of his life, of the succession, make the lawyers more willing to hear Richard's claim. That is human nature."

A breath of May breeze drew across the terrace scattering the flame-tinted blossoms. Lady Monkton drew her white lace scarf over her shoulders.



"Sir John Flippin is coming to luncheon," she remarked. "It's odd Richard should have taken such a fancy to him. He is a blunt man."

Mr. Ventris's little shrug disposed of Sir John Flippin. "His bluntness carries weight with many people, Denise. So far he has been slow to convince, but I think when once he has talked with Coles—"

"McNeil's nephew, you mean? I thought you had hoped—"

"I have been forced to bring him forward, that is true," he was evidently reluctant to discuss Coles and hastened on: "Have you any other news?"

"Miss Lang has some letters, accounts and so on. The American lady—the one who is staying with the vicar, sketches in the Park every day. I suppose that is all right?"

"No doubt. She is a quiet-looking person. I noticed her as I drove up. Have you had many visitors?"

"Only the usual Thursday group. Richard went round with them once, for practice."

"A good idea. He shall continue to do so while I am away."

"Charles, must you go?" The note of trouble in her voice did not escape Mr. Ventris. Up to now they had been sitting side by side in comradely, easy talk as they were wont, both gazing at the garden scene. But at her words he turned his black eyes full upon hers.

"Yes: I must go—and within a week or so. There is much to be seen to and the autumn sales

in Paris this year are most important. Moreover, I must dispose of some items myself I fear. All this affair of Richard takes money, my dear Denise."

Her glance fell away from his and her white eyelids hid it. She folded her hands together, saying nothing. Her companion, settling himself more at ease in his chair, let his practised and loving gaze travel over the building in front of him, linger upon the escutcheons, the rampant unicorns, the twist of the chimney carvings, the ornamental lead-pipe heads at the eaves, the glittering pattern of the window-panes. Suddenly he straightened:

"Look, Denise! that wreath—the one to the right of the urn, do you see? It has loosened and may fall. Granger must go to the roof at once. I would not have that carving broken for a hundred pounds. Where is Miss Lang?"

His voice, his manner, were animated and anxious. Lady Monkton, too, arose, and both of them looked eagerly for any probable damage. They were still discussing this when the secretary just mentioned made her appearance on the terrace from the house, together with Mr. Richard Monkton, who had innocently accompanied her thither, not a little to her embarrassment.

Miss Lang was a thin, erect, light-footed young woman, with a great deal of black, black hair. Her grey-green eyes were as clear, and nearly as deep, as the sea. She had a wide, capable mouth and pointed hands, and, but for the reserve in her face, she looked more Irish than



Scots. There was also, somehow and somewhere, a dash of the Latin about her; she moved with grace and pliant quickness. One felt that the smile, which she almost never showed, would be attractive; that, should she ever permit herself to become unprofessional, her personality might be picturesque. At the moment, that was the last thing she thought about. Miss Lang's father had been a distinguished historian, and her chief preoccupation, aside from her work, was to do his memory credit. Therefore she was exceedingly serious, and her manner was impersonal and businesslike in the highest degree. She knew nothing about Americans and tended to distrust anyone who succeeded in making her laugh. Thus she was uncomfortable at the constraint forced upon her by Mr. Monkton's innocently joining her in a manner which she was well aware, Lady Monkton would hardly fail to notice and disapprove. The companionship had been none of Jean's seeking, and she felt that a guest in the house ought to have known better.

Luckily, her employer was too much absorbed in the discovery of the loosened stonework to notice anything except that the invaluable Miss Lang was there when needed. She was instructed; her opinion asked, and details necessary to the restoration settled, in an animated discussion, during which Richard could only stand by to listen with his usual feeling of helpless ignorance.



## CHAPTER VIII

### THE LEGEND OF ST. COLUMBA

**T**HAT beginning of a new world for Dick dated from the day when, still a little weak and shaky, he went down to Shank with Mr. Ventriss in the motor. Like the rise of a curtain on some great opera or Shakesperean play, this beginning wore a glow of vague splendor, the shape and color of a dream. Even now he could not grasp it; he still awoke with the dawn in an almost intolerable bewilderment; the gorgeous future he stared into seemed shot with strange flashes of pain. That those around him understood this disquiet, sympathized with it, in a sense made life no easier; there were moments when Dick became hot at the memory of his own misjudgments.

He had spent ten days in a nursing home; exhausted, the doctor said, from shock and excitement. During that period, Sir John Flippin came to see him several times: but Charles Ventriss came every day. He made these visits naturally, easily, sweetly: coming softly in to sit by the young man's bed as if he liked to be there.

He took Dick's congeniality of taste for granted. Sometimes he carried a bunch of fresh violets or daffodils: sometimes he took from his pocket with a mysterious smile, an intricately lacquered shrine, a little, serene ivory carving or a print, or a minuscule manuscript and laid them before Dick to give him pleasure. Once he brought Dick's father's Virgil and insisted on making it a present. The boy came to long for these visits; his imagination played over the figure of this friend, with his pale, delicate face, his black eyes with flames in them, his caressing voice. Richard never quite felt that he understood this different elder man, but he loved him. They soon became "Diccon" and "M. Charles" to one another.

All the while Dick was in the nursing home, the story of his strange claim began to run through the London world as fire in grass. That was a world which knew what Shank stood for: which remembered many claimants and many claims in the past. M. Charles was careful to talk to him about all this as little as possible; but M. Charles, when he went out to dine every evening—for it was now mid-season and he was a famous personage in his way—M. Charles gave a very skilful and sympathetic portrait of his young protégé. It became well known everywhere who this young man was supposed to be and that he was handsome and engaging, had done manfully in the Argonne and showed evidence of possessing most of the Monkton tastes. Such a contrast to that shocking oaf, Lycett Monkton, who had



showed no proper sense of his position or responsibilities! When M. Charles dined out, he was frank in saying that to his mind the claimant was as good as a baronet already; although Sir John Flippin pursed a doubtful mouth, and there existed no force in the United Kingdom which could hasten the formalities in the hands of the family solicitor, Mr. Ingleby Scrope. Antiquaries and fellow-collectors told M. Charles their wish that the claimant would devote himself to completing the catalogue raisonné which had been interrupted by the death of Sir Piers: dukes and duchesses expressed their hope that he would marry one of those enormous new fortunes, which alone justify themselves, in ducal eyes, by such a consecration. More than one tall young lady with wheat-colored hair and dangling jade earrings went to her bed hoping that the future owner of Shank might be fancy-free.... Incautious people, anxious to be diverted, made advances to the claimant; invitations began to come to the nursing-home....cards to be left there. Richard heard vaguely about these things but they were not shown to him. The doctor told the nurse that all this might excite her patient and that his mail should be opened by Charles Ventris. In reality, it was Charles Ventris who had told the doctor this, but so skilfully that the medical man thought he had arrived at the decision of his own motion. Two or three American letters came during this time, were glanced through and laid aside. If Richard asked for news of any particular correspondent, the letter was produced

at once—after his permission to see if it *was* that correspondent had been scrupulously asked and accorded. But if he did *not* ask for it, the letter after awhile quietly disappeared and nothing was said. In Mr. Ventris's mind, all threads with the past and with the States were better broken....

The day Richard went down in the car was enchanting: all the way his guide discoursed, characteristically, about the country-side, its history and its traditions.

"The Marquis of Granby public-house? Yes, there are dozens of 'em—but I like to think of Mr. Weller....capital, capital! That mansion? Oh my dear boy, it's full of the most dreadful stuff—most of it spurious.... The fella—I believe he was a butcher, bought house and contents together.... There were originally some good things—a few fine bindings—but he *would* put central heating in his library, and that was that—"

The scorn caused Dick to venture—"But perhaps it was cold—and he liked to be comfortable....?"

"What if he did?" the other's tone icily breathed the probable atmosphere of the parvenu's purchase. "Why shouldn't a butcher named McTavish be uncomfortable, so long as the books were preserved?"

Dick felt that he must laugh and did so: but Charles Ventris was absolutely serious.

"Mean it? Of course I mean it. You too will feel that way when you see Shank. You and I do not count—we go—Shank stands."



The vibration of his tone had a startling intensity. Dick recalled what Sir John Flippin had said that perhaps M. Charles was a bit of a monomaniac. A week later he was telling himself that M. Charles and Lady Monkton and himself were all by way of being monomaniacs together.

When he first saw Lady Monkton she was standing under the Hoppner at the end of the small drawing-room with the fretted ceiling. Dazed with the stately grandeur, he had crossed the quadrangle, a piece of Oxford, passed through halls and galleries....to where she waited, the incarnation of the spirit of the house. Her almond-shaped eyes had greeted him with a soft light: her hair might well have been the powdered coiffure of the past. Her smile was subtle, slow and enigmatic. Like all Shank, she was not merely beautiful, but strange, too, and picturesque, and reserved, hiding much under an heraldic front. One found her fascinating but puzzling. Who and what was she, Denise Monkton? No: Dick did not pretend to solve her. Her welcome was cordial, but she seemed to look beyond him. She looked at Shank.

For this reticent absorption, he was in one way grateful. By tacit agreement he came merely as an American cousin on a visit, while any possible change which might affect his future was avoided in conversation. The servants had been warned, and thus he might remain himself for as long as he would, though that in the nature of things could not be long. For how could one be oneself, who, on awaking, looked from a mul-

lioned window on that incredible turf, the carpet for a yew fantastically clipped? Or when, sitting at table, one beheld through an open door vista on vista, carven, rich, colored? Or when, at his simplest remark, Lady Monkton shot him one of her side-long glances, while M. Charles seemed incomprehensively gratified? Or when, crossing the gallery, he caught the eyes of Sir Piers Monkton's portrait bent on him questioningly? His days needs must pass uneasily, not only in that dreamlike setting, but companioned by figures whose vital difference from himself made them cloudy as the figures in a dream. Sometimes he wondered what they thought of him. He need not have worried; they were astute, seeing him for what he was, sensitive, with an exotic and scrupulous pride, and showing an unusual combination of romantic imagination and straightforward simplicity. Notwithstanding their background, both of them were far more literal-minded than their guest. They beheld Shank with passion, but as a material reality, while Dick saw a "huge cloudy symbol of a high romance."

These days found him silent, absorbed. He could not talk; he must watch and dream; and he must shut out of his mind that insistent picture of Clinton street and the face of that father—who knew? Ah, no! how could he have known? Denise was right in saying Dick was bewildered, and these new friends, too, bewildered him. Gradually one or two impressions emerged and stayed. He learned that he must not look for the clear definite outlines of character to which he



was accustomed, as to the clear definite sunshine of his own country. In this older world were gradations, *nuances*, unknown tones and shadings. Who could help loving M. Charles, who had been so good to him, who had not even laughed at him for his folly when they first met? Yet he could see, too, that M. Charles was a thought over-civilized, and that his great learning and his unique passion had warped him from warm human feeling. At home, life was shallower; in general one was able to see clear to the bottom of most things; here, the atmosphere seemed at moments a little turbid. One must adapt oneself, and this was not so easy to do when one was truly bedazzled by the gorgeousness of Shank.

When Dick was "shown the house," it was with a warning that he could not come to know it in a day, that the collections would take years of study. At first, the thing struck him as a series of impressions of color, color sometimes vehement and shrill, more often tender and faded into the undertones of the past. He was led across green and grey court yards, up painted staircases in black oak, cream and tinted marbles, frescoes in salmon and mauve and blue, through galleries hung with rose-red and moss-green Italian velvets with bronze fringes, where scarlet patches from stained glass lay on the floor, and florid Renaissance chimney-pieces gleamed with onyx inlays and silver firedogs. The panelled ballroom upheld a frieze of heraldic beasts above a wall where the pictures hung on rose and white brocades. Blue-green tapestries hung

the State chambers. There were vases in blue and nacre, in saffron deepening to flame, in jade and indigo and jet. There were porcelains pearly and opaque, or translucent topaz, sapphire, and amethyst..... The noon-tide glow in the banqueting hall was that of a Cardinal's robes.... A little oratory in a far corner sparkled crimson like a Venetian casket.... The farthingale chairs stood in sober battalions; their cushions were plum-color or brown, leading to overtones of amber in the books rising behind them. Bowls of potpourri upon the window-sills added their delicate odors to the fresh and elated fragrance of May.... And everywhere were pictures, ancient pictures, famous crystals of vanished genius, rich, unbelievable. Their colors were untranslatable into Dick's language; Holbeins and Rembrandts that were wine-dark and sable-silvered; Reynolds, with brown that might be gold, and all with a gamut of neutral tints, of ochres and umbers and greys and blacks, which, with his love of painting, he had never even known.

Some of the rooms were friendly. He would have lingered but must be taken on; to the Oak Parlor where the panelling was the most ornate in England; to the remains of the ancient ecclesiastical wing, with its Norman doorways and arches. Then, up a back stair and down a long passage hung with arms and arras, he was conducted into what M. Charles had named the "Scriptorium." This was a big, bare room in the older wing, furnished with presses and trestle-



tables and dedicated to care of the collections. Mr. Ventris showed Richard the words which were painted above the doorway, and translated them for him:

“Benedicere digneris, Domine, hoc scriptorium famulorum tuorum.” (Vouchsafe, O Lord, to bless this workroom of Thy servants.)

“And this is our *Armarius*,” Mr. Ventris said, with his sympathetic smile, “Miss Lang.”

A tall girl who had been absorbedly bent over one of the tables on their entrance, lifted her head and bowed slightly. She did not offer to shake hands, rather to Dick’s surprise. She wasn’t a particularly pretty girl, he decided, though he noticed her black hair and straight, penetrating look. An apron covered her, and her long, expert fingers were occupied in some nice task. Nearby stood a carved chair with a velvet seat.

“From the Green Gallery?” M. Charles asked, tapping this on the arm. Miss Lang nodded. “The fringe of that whole group must be seen to this spring. I thought best to begin without asking you,” she said.

“Quite so. Anything else?”

“The porcelains in the Mandarin Room have been all gone over last week and the cabinets examined. There are a few cracks. I thought—” They were deep in consultation in an instant, while Lady Monkton turned to Richard with a smile. “You see we never let any vandal restorers into Shank,” she explained. “Miss Lang is invaluable and she has been trained under Charles’s own eye.”

"Nothing looks really old," Dick commented. He said very little, Lady Monkton thought; but she noticed that his eye was steady and absorbed, and that gratified her.

"That is all due to Charles's perpetual devotion and skill," she told him. "Before Miss Lang came, he did much of the work himself. . . . Sir Piers and I helped him. There is more care than you would think. Wherever the public comes in, there is always danger."

"The public! Are you telling Diccon our troubles?" Mr. Ventris had now rejoined them; "Our *bête noir*! It's the custom to admit them on Thursdays and we cannot change. But it always makes us nervous, doesn't it, Miss Lang?"

"By the way," the secretary observed, rising and coming towards them, "the same man has presented himself at the Guardhouse for the last three public days in succession. I thought you would like to know." This piece of information produced a certain concentration in M. Charles. He shot a series of questions;

"Who took him round?"

"I did myself twice: once Dolly went."

"Nothing unusual in his manner? Nothing suspicious?"

"Oh no, sir—not in the least. He seemed to take an intelligent interest."

"Did he ask to see anything special? Anything out of the way?"

"No, sir. He made the general rounds—the Great Hall, the Chapel, the Galleries, the State Apartments."



"Did he come alone?"

"Twice, yes. The third time he went round with the lady who sketches in the park; the one who is staying with Mr. Waverley."

Mr. Ventriss appeared to consider. "I take it that the vicar vouches for her?" he asked, and Miss Lang hastened to reassure him. "In every way—she came highly recommended. I've talked with her quite often myself. She's an American lady and very nice." Miss Lang's voice showed warmth: it was plain she liked the American lady.

Over M. Charles's face had fallen an expression of watchfulness at which Dick wondered.

"Are you afraid of thieves, sir? Surely, with all these people about—"

"*Of course* I am afraid!" the curator's voice broke out with sudden vehemence. "There has never been a time when we had more cause. The whole world out there—" he waved an arm, "is full of envy, of covetousness....! Prices are higher than I have ever known them. The Americans in the market are like wolves—they vie with one another in bidding things up. Not a day goes by without offers. Last month it was the "Great Hoppner"—the month before those Cellini pieces in the State Drawing-room—no—one cannot help being apprehensive...."

"But the pictures are well known. How could one sell the Great Hoppner—a thief would be caught at once—!"

"What is so well known as the Mona Lisa? Yet it was lost for two years, and rescued by sheer accident."

This was incontrovertible, of course, and served as a sharp spur to the hobby on which M. Charles was now mounted. "No, if I dared I would shut the public out and admit no one except by signed permit," he pursued, striding up and down the room and gesticulating at them. "But that would be breaking old custom and would set the village even more against us. Piers and I talked of it—you remember, Denise?—and decided that the Thursdays must go on, particularly in view of that debate in the House when the Labor Members grumbled about the subsidies for keeping up these great collections from which the people were excluded. No: we cannot change—but often I do not sleep for thinking of the danger...."

He looked around upon his audience and seemed to feel from their looks that perhaps he was overcharged, for he tried a lighter note and laid his arm caressingly around Dick's shoulders. "These are some of our cares, my boy," he added, and smiled.

Lady Monkton observed: "You are unduly nervous, Charles, I think," in a cold voice suggesting a rebuke; and shortly afterwards they left the Scriptorium. During the rest of the day, Mr. Ventris was easy and animated: he talked of joys, not fears. The next morning he returned to London, leaving Dick at Shank, where the young man rapidly recovered his physical strength, if not so quickly his mental poise.

Days had passed, steeped in sunshine, days in which he struggled to realize this romantic beau-



ty and adapt himself to it. . . . as yet all remained unreal. . . . Thursday came: and from a window he watched the small party of tourists cross the quadrangle to the main portal under the guidance of the efficient and erect Miss Lang. Dick saw them with all M. Charles's distrust, but with more curiosity, and after awhile the distrust vanished. The two school-girls; the man who arrived on a bicycle; the quartet from a motor, who wore over-elaborate clothes and shouted at one another their enthusiasm in high-pitched voices; the shortish, middle-aged lady who carried a sketch-book; he saw them all disappear under Henry VIII's Gate and could hear their tread and voices passing from room to room overhead. . . . surely they seemed harmless enough? Then they all came down again, lingered in the quadrangle, casting curious glances at the young man in the grey suit who sat idly smoking on a bench nearby, then reluctantly turned to buy post-cards from Dolly at the Guard-house, where she, and her father (who rejoiced in the name of Abraham Gapper) made a little business of selling such things.

The ladies got into their motor, which was waiting for them, and Dick could hear their shrill "Did you ever's" and "Oh my dear, how perfect's!" till their car bore them off. The others he saw soberly wending their way on foot across the park in the direction of the railway-station. The lady with the sketch-book fell behind the group, walking slowly; she was evidently tired, and indeed Shank *was* tiring. He could

testify to that himself. He had never been more tired in his life than after the first day's effort to see that plethora of exhausting richness.... Four acres of house is no trifle when you think of it!

Mr. Ventris's bitter speeches of scorn about "the public" recurred to Dick with surprise as unnecessary. Surely, to give pleasure to these harmless people by a share of this beauty did not seem much.... Why should one wish to keep it to oneself?

All this was part of an attitude Dick could not share because he was opposed to it educationally, nationally, one had almost said racially. It was part of a whole group of differences which lay between him and his hosts and which they expected time would overcome. At the moment, gratitude and politeness caused him to shrug them aside: but they lay at the bottom of his desire to find the Thursday tourists inoffensive if possible. Chancing to be alone with Miss Lang next morning in the library, where she was at work, he ventured to enquire:

"Did anything happen yesterday—when the sight-seers came? Did the mysterious man return?"

Miss Lang lifted down a vellum-covered volume to blow imaginary dust from its cream and golden surface. "No: the man didn't," she answered him, "but the woman did. I must tell Mr. Ventris when I see him today."

"You mean the one that sketches in the Park?"



"Yes. She is one of your country people. Her name is Byrd, Mrs. Byrd. I like her very much."

She kept steadily, busily at work, examining each treasured manuscript and wiping it off with a soft cloth. Dick said:

"You seem very busy—do you always work so hard?"

"Oh this is not hard—it is just part of the regular weekly routine. I always handle the Manuscripts myself. It takes no skill, just care."

"But I have seen you at your skilled work too."

She was silent, and Dick, who was used to a readier response, decided that she was shy.

"Do you live here—are you English?" he asked her after a pause, and the girl turned with the first smile he had seen upon her wide and whimsical mouth.

"How amusing that you should notice," she commented, shutting the case and locking it. "No: I am living at Shank because it is Lady Monkton's wish but my home is in Scotland—Kincardineshire. My mother and my old nurse are there."

"And you go home for the holidays?"

"Surely. But not very often. It makes Lady Monkton nervous to be alone with the collections."

"But Mr. Ventris is here all the time....?"

"Not all the time. Mr. Ventris lives in London."

The secretary's manner seemed to rebuke a curiosity which was not intended, so Richard changed the subject.

"You spend all your time among these wonderful things—it's really a privilege."

"It *is* a great privilege."

"I have seen you in the Scriptorium—and what else do you do?"

"I examine things for Mr. Ventris—I make lists and catalogues—descriptions for the articles he writes sometimes—oh, I do lots of mysterious things away up there in the Scriptorium!" She spoke playfully, almost with gayety. After all, she was about his own age.

"You must know all the secrets of Shank."

The smile faded out of the girl's face and was succeeded by a set look. She shook her head, and the young man continued:

"I shall run up some day and peep through the key-hole," he challenged, so freely that she felt surprise.

With health, Dick was regaining his spirits.

"Do you know the legend of St. Columba?" Miss Lang asked him in her composed, business-like voice, and went on to tell it him while she was opening the next case....

"St. Columba wanted to make a clandestine copy of Finnian's Psalter, so he shut himself up at night in the church: and while he wrote with his right hand, the light that he needed miraculously radiated from his left. A curious wanderer, attracted by the gleam, put his eye to the key-hole and had it picked out by a crane, whom God had sent to guard St. Columba's labors."

"So I had better watch out?"



Both laughed. Then Jean, looking through the window, noticed that Lady Monkton seated on the terrace, had been joined by Mr. Ventris. She hurried out at once, and Dick quite naturally rose to accompany her.

## CHAPTER IX

### “LES TREYZE SAINCTES HYSTOIRES DU JEAN DE BRAQ.”

**T**HE question of the loosened stone garland and similar matters kept the group on the terrace occupied until Sir John Flippin was announced, followed shortly afterwards by the vicar, Mr. Waverley, when they went in to luncheon. Miss Lang meanwhile had disappeared. Her appearance at table was capricious and governed by some mysterious law which the American failed entirely to comprehend. Dick found himself seated next Sir John, who looked today the outdoor sort of person that he was. Over Sir John's head a superb Holbein, a lordling of the past, gazed with reflective and melancholy eyes upon the blooming lady by Sir Peter Lely on the opposite wall.

Sir John greeted his young friend with hearty pleasure that he seemed well again—"altogether fit," as the barrister put it. They had small opportunity to talk together, for it chanced that Mr. Ventris and the vicar at once launched on antiquarian anecdote and old manuscript gossip,



fascinating to hear. Mr. Ventris that day was in vein. His talk, swift, agreeable, colored like some rich arras with brilliant figures, was also not without touches of cynicism. Things, he declared, were infinitely more important than people: books than human lives.

"..... Catherine of Russia was perfectly right when she sacrificed her moujiks to guard her Raphaels. They were immortal. What do half the human beings in the world amount to? Nothing! They are not even handsome!" He looked for sympathy from one face to another as he went on.....

"Old Sir Peter Pyke was telling me at the Club yesterday that, on account of his gout, he was thinking of putting central heating in his library—fancy the destruction....! 'My God' said I, 'if you do, Sir Peter, you won't have a binding left in ten years!' 'Well, if I don't, M. Charles,' he answered me, 'my own binding will be stripped and in the grave in ten months.' 'Plenty more as good as your's!' I told him." Mr. Ventris's eyebrows went up and his black eyes snapped: while Mr. Waverly looked rather shocked.

"Old Pyke's binding, I agree, is hardly worth saving," Sir John rejoined; "but if you were a barrister, my dear Ventris, you'd see that doctrine won't do....it's the unseen inheritance that counts...."

"Pooh! Pooh!" said the other, with smiling, shrugging opposition, "Figments! Shibboleths! Half the time non existent, the rest obsolete!"

The other disagreeing, he became animated.

“It’s what we hold, what we see, what we touch, that raises us above the brutes,” he insisted. “What made England great? The land, the houses on the land, the things in the houses. I’m for the old Monkton motto—‘Shank, not rank.’ ”

“Don’t let him teach you such crass materialism,” Sir John said to his young friend. But Dick, who felt he understood M. Charles in his humor, smiled sympathetically at him across the table. Sir John saw the smile, and for some reason was irritated.

“Some of us think,” he observed, “that there have been Monktons in the past who sacrificed pretty valuable stuff for the sake of all this—”

“What sort of stuff do you mean?” Dick asked, unwisely, and Sir John answered rather loudly, “*Honor’s* what I mean, my boy!”

It was pointed, and Dick flushed for his hostess, Lady Monkton, who had sat immobile, merely dropped her eyelids over her cold eyes. Mr. Ventriss only looked amused: if he felt annoyance, he didn’t show it. He went on eating his asparagus, and his expression throughout was almost studiously gracious.

“Tut, tut,” said he, “Come, come, Sir John, I don’t know. Family archives don’t bear you out in that accusation. It’s true that, like me, the Monktons felt human happiness to be a slight and transitory thing in comparison to Beauty like this, which is irreplaceable and eternal. I am sincere in feeling that everything ought to



be sacrificed to it. I used to say so to Piers and I keep saying so to Diccon here."

"I've no doubt you do," was Sir John's dry rejoinder. Dick looked across the room at a portrait of the late Sir Piers—whom he had inwardly resolved never to call by any other name—and began to realize what the influence of Charles Ventriss must have been upon that dead friend. The painted face wore a narrow, self-indulgent, weak expression, he thought: how this fire must have warmed that dull soul! When he turned back again, the conversation had changed.

"I know of nothing antedating the Plato in the Bodleian—the one made for Diaconus Arethras of Patras in 896."

"But there's a half-uncial script in the Capitular Library at Verona that I recall as earlier than 550 A. D." This from Mr. Waverley.

"No, no—the one I mean was on purple dyed sheepskin, borders diapered in gold and foliated—a most lovely thing," Mr. Ventriss assured him: while Sir John, evidently desiring forgiveness, turned to Lady Monkton with some flattery, which passed into talk about common acquaintances and the progress of the season in town.

Meanwhile the light May breezes wandered in at the open casements, the May sunbeams touched with fine fingers the face of Sir Peter Lely's pouting model. The servants had left the five to themselves and to the fruit piled upon the salvers and to the wine in the old decanters. Dick wondered at it all—fell into a reverie that

he should be seated there, in that famous little Dining Parlor, where John Locke had sat at table with John Selden; where the Spelmans, Archbishop Ussher, Robert Cotton, and the stiffly learned William Camden had held long antiquarian conferences together. Now he had place in that company. . . . . A dream, surely? Through the window he could see the white peacock still making gestures from the wall. He came out of his reverie to hear another topic under discussion.

"Undoubtedly, I agree with you," Flippin was saying. He had well lunched and was now by way of agreeing with what was said. "The War has lowered the value of human life. Hence this wave of violence. . . . bonds have been unloosed: standards altered. . . ."

"I have noticed a lamentable indifference, a distinct falling-off in my congregation," came from the vicar, and to Dick's surprise, nobody smiled.

"It's a deep, underlying restlessness—really, a sort of tacit warfare between those who have and those who have not. . . . and it works for evil both ways. Those who haven't are breaking the laws more readily to get, while those who have are far less scrupulous in holding on."

"The simple plan," M. Charles quoted, "that those shall get who have the power that those shall keep who can—" and a very good thing in my opinion."

"You are truly consistent, Ventris," said Sir John and was near laughing. But M. Charles was serious enough.



"Can it be possible you don't agree?" he earnestly protested. "Don't you see one is forced into holding on—our class especially—lest all that is holy goes over the abyss—ideas and things together....? When one thinks of the destruction in Russia!—and even among our own ranks there are defections every day. Men come to me who are selling their pictures, furniture, manuscripts—not that they may live, but that they may go to Monte Carlo....! It's shocking.... No: it's a struggle to keep and one must not be too squeamish either. The end justifies the means, because we must hang together until the disintegration!"

"You grow too exthited, Charles," Lady Monkton lisped, but he only looked at her, absorbed.

"Our responsibility, as I tell Diccon here, is toward the Past—" and he was still speaking enthusiastically on this theme when they rose from the table.

Sir John's visit had a purpose, which, with true English deliberateness, must needs wait till he had lunched to his mind. Then the vicar and Dick accompanied Lady Monkton to the garden, while the other two repaired to the Oak Parlor, where they smoked, surrounded by the famous Reynolds group, all in tones of bronze, crimson, and cream. The Lady Molly Monkton, who smiled down on them, wore a white gown with a gold colored sash as she trod upon yellowing beech-leaves, and was the most distractingly lovely creature, the K. C. insisted, that he'd ever

laid eyes on. He felt obliged to apologize to his gratified companion, for the attention he paid her charms....

"No place for business, this, eh what? With all these charmers about....The smile on my lady's face up there cannot be worth less than £10,000!"

Mr. Ventris crinkled up his eyes and laughed.

"£15,000 in the American market," he rejoined smoothly; "and you are very readily forgiven for succumbing to Lady Molly, my dear Flippin! Dukes did so in their day—monarchs too, if I am not mistaken....But—now—these letters of the woman McNeil—I have them with me. Will you look at them?"

Sir John became grave and moved his head as though he already felt the scratch of his wig. He took the papers which the other handed him, and for some minutes silence succeeded while he read. Mr. Ventris let his own eye wander from picture to panelling and back again. Having read, Sir John folded and replaced the fragile yellowed scraps of cheap letter paper and pulled afresh at his cigar.

"Well, of course, so far as they go—there is nothing to be said to them," was his reflective observation. "They are quite plain—quite. The woman states in so many words what Lady Monkton did and what action she herself took; and how she felt after she had disposed of the infant. And I take it you have no doubt that these are genuine letters of this woman?"

"None. I have compared them with specimens of her writing here; they are genuine."



"So I supposed. You are the last person to be imposed on by a forgery, I know."

"I have spent my life in the study of manuscript; it is true."

"Then that's that. But there are puzzling features. It is odd that no one comes forward who saw McNeil with the child....or the American Monktons for that matter!"

"Odd after twenty-four years?"

"I cannot but think so."

"The War lies between."

"I know: that *may* account for it...." but Flippin's frown showed that he was not satisfied. "I have often noticed that strangers, visitors to England, leave few traces behind them. They are flotsam, drifting on the tide; they take a house, their servants disperse—in a short time nobody seems to recall them. It is very odd. And it is important here. Have you done everything to trace this woman McNeil?"

"Everything that Scrope could suggest, but in vain," Mr. Ventris admitted reluctantly: "we've searched, advertised—so far, nothing! The earth has swallowed her—literally, no doubt, for to my mind she must be dead."

"Well, that's very unfortunate for your young friend, then," was Sir John's composed opinion.

The other protested. "How so? These letters are incontrovertible—they are decisive statements of fact. Isn't that evidence?"

"Not sufficient in themselves to my mind."

"Not when you consider the likeness and my own testimony?"

"Not even then. After all, the likeness was strong and these traits have shown themselves in the cadet branch.... So you said, at least, in your letter to the boy which he showed me on ship-board. And what did your acquaintance with Mr. Richard Monkton, senior, amount to? You took him to Shank for the week-end and he was witness to the dissension between Sir Piers and his wife.... Then, since he never told you that he had any child, you jump to the conclusion that he was childless!"

Ventris appeared to be deeply thoughtful, and his immobility caused Sir John to proceed.

"The Attorney-General would require more evidence than this, I fear. Remember, the claimant himself cannot aid you. He has no recollections...."

"He can produce the very rug which McNeil mentions, Flippin!"

"And who is to tell if it is the very rug?" Sir John rose and betook himself and his cigar to the hearth. "My dear Ventris, the Law is the Law. And in this case—forgive me, but frankness is best.... your own hostility to Sir Lycett is well known. It lends a motive...."

The other interrupted him with a little angry laugh. "I should never deny what I feel about that man!" he declared. "I regard him as a beast, as a criminal. He is the greatest danger Shank has faced in half a century. But if he succeeds—he succeeds: and that is all there is to it. I can do nothing. My intense desire for his death cannot be felt in the Antarctic ice!"



He spoke with a restrained violence which caused Sir John to shrug his shoulders.

"Well, perhaps your prayers may be answered. The Antarctic is a roomy graveyard. But do not let us lose the thread. You have asked my opinion—although a barrister, y'know, need not be an expert on these matters. Find McNeil, and if she confirms her own letter, your case could probably be won. Find, if you can, the servants at the house where the infant was left. Surely, Mrs. Monkton told somebody the truth at some time or other. A letter from her, though not perhaps evidence, might go far to help."

"I had already thought of it....but the boy cannot assist me there. He was an only child when she died....and certainly no one close to them seems to have suspected anything out of the way regarding his birth."

"Quite so. The thing that worries me is the question of character," the K. C. observed. "You knew Monkton....you were friends.... Was he the kind to take this infant and carry it home as his own, do you think? He ran great risks, remember. The affair is out of key with what the boy knows of him."

"Not with what I recall," Mr. Ventris asserted. "Monkton was extremely romantic—as Americans are, you know. He was fascinated by our social fabric; rather naively so, I thought. And he was very much under the influence of his wife."

"But you never met his wife."

Mr. Ventris pinched together his lips as if annoyed. "True; but one knows!"

A pause fell, which Mr. Ventriss broke:

"I should remind you that there is no trace of registration in London of the birth of a child to Mr. and Mrs. Monkton."

"That at best is only proving a negative; and how about on the Continent whence they came to London?"

"I have examined with no result."

"The record would destroy your case, but its absence hardly helps you."

It was plain that this conversation disappointed M. Charles. He asked once more: "Then you do not think that on the evidence of the letter Scrope can apply to the Home Secretary?"

"As to that I should prefer that you also get the opinion of a civilian....it is not a branch of the law with which I am familiar. I am treating the case rather from the standpoint of a man of the world. Backed by a witness, these letters are very strong evidence. Without such backing, they are in my mind no evidence at all...for the reason that they are only letters when all is said. Who can say whether the writer tells the truth? Do I disappoint you?"

"I confess it. I had thought such plain statements would be accepted in any court. But I should keep you no longer from the gardens on so lovely a day. Shall we join Lady Monkton?"

The glance which he exchanged with the latter when they met, was the only effect M. Charles showed of the discussion with Sir John Flippin. He did not re-open the subject, but made him-



self as charming as possible in his enjoyment of the gardens until the barrister departed for London.....

"Come Diccon, come Denise," he said, while they were strolling back toward the Great House—"come to the Manuscript Room. I shall show you the treasures of Shank....Where is Miss Lang? She shall get the keys and Diccon shall see the Treyze Hystoires."

Miss Lang was summoned and appeared; keys in hand, all four proceeded to the Manuscript Room, which adjoined the Oak or Panelled Parlor. M. Charles unlocked a special cabinet and took from it a large leather case. Meanwhile Miss Lang had set nearby an ancient carved lectern, and M. Charles reverently drew the folio from its protective velvet. When he laid it thereon he bade Dick note the jewelled binding, the clasps which bore a king's cypher. The pages, as he spread them open, blazed with minute inlayings of color, as if they had been a woven tissue: intricate borders of interlacing flowers and grotesques on a gilded ground surrounded the miniatures with rich and delicate ornament.....

"A thought too florid perhaps," murmured M. Charles bending over it; "personally, I have a greater love for the more naif and restrained style of a century earlier....What do you say, Diccon?"

Dick, who had gasped with pleasure, merely shook his head. He had no opinion. M. Charles glanced over his absorbed figure to Lady Monk-

ton, meeting her eyes with a smile. Both of them looked, not at the glorious illumination but at the sensitive face bent over it: the hands whose touch was delicate and loving.....

"Was Flippin very disappointing, Charles?"

Denise asked the question. The two sat late together in the soft, spring twilight talking of the past. At the name Mr. Ventris made an impatient gesture.

"He was what he is—a lawyer. You know those gentry. I should not trouble to win him over but for the fact that Richard seems to value his judgment."

"I thought him horridly rude at lunch."

"That very bluntness will make him a valuable ally once he is convinced. And we shall convince him—have I ever failed to do what I wished?"

"Never, Charles."

The vain smile with which he had spoken died out into seriousness.

"You saw the boy's face when he looked at the Treyze Hystoires....could there be any doubt in the world left? Was he not a real Monkton, the child, the protector of Shank?"

Her face lit and quivered.

"When you remember that other! But I shall not even think of him. I have no doubts myself. Richard must be the heir: proofs of the fact must exist: if they exist, they must be found. That woman McNeil—can she be alive, do you think?"

"No Charles; I feel she is dead."



"So do I. So do I. Well: there are possible clues. I must talk again to Scrope....I must work harder—Denise...we have sacrificed everything for Shank, you and I!"

"God knows!"

There was a note of despair in her voice. He saw her hand lying on the arm of her chair and laid his own upon it. In the dusk his eyes were gleaming.

"You made the great sacrifice....don't think I forget....and if there are other tasks and sacrifices ahead....I know I can count on you! I know you will not fail me."

His strange, compelling voice had the effect upon her that it always had....all that she might have said died in her throat....Her hand lay in his quite helplessly and they sat thus in silence for a long while. Charles Ventris forgot to smoke: his head was bent on his breast and his veiled eyes were deep in thought.

## CHAPTER X

### THE ARTIST'S COLOR-BOX

**S**HE was a strange creature, Denise Monkton. Dick felt at times that she belonged, not merely to another country, but to another age. The women he had known thus far were clear, alert, positive, self-confident; expressed themselves readily on any subject; had a crystal sureness of manner; knew their own value in the scheme of their world; feared nothing, doubted nothing, and played the ancient game of sex-attraction with a certain hardness of touch and abstraction of thought, as one, let us say, plays the organ, who might prefer to play the piano. They flirted tremendously, but it was an awakened flirtation: one felt that the bright creature was watching one all the while, saying to herself: "Such-and-such stops of this queer instrument will produce such-and-such music—how stupid!" At bottom they were as comradely, definite, and devoted as men themselves.

Nothing could be less clear than Lady Monkton. Her personality was a clouded glass whereon strange figures moved at strange tasks.



She was capable of extreme passivity, lying for hours on the terrace with folded hands; but Dick, when he heard her dictating to Miss Lang in the mornings, saw that she was capable of extreme activity as well. Her alternations of languor and energy were capricious. Sometimes she vanished from sight—or appeared to do so—for hours, and would be found sitting in perfect quiet in one of the more beautiful rooms or galleries—just looking, looking. She was exceedingly studied in dress, a study which had no reference to the fashions, for she shrouded her long, thin figure in the dead-black or dead-white draperies of widowhood, on which glittered a cross that had once belonged to Marguerite de Navarre. It seemed to link her strangely to the Valois. Usually, she talked little. When she talked much, her lisp became apparent. She often asked questions: she seldom answered them save by a slow smile. Her people at Shank, dependents, neighbors, retainers, thought her hard: she had none of the bluff maternalism of the usual aristocratic landholder. “’Er ladyship don’t ’eed,” they would say, “she’s a secret one, she is!” Denise didn’t heed; or rather what she heeded was interior. The paradoxical things about her were her unsureness and her extreme nervousness. Her passivity had little to do with tranquillity, it seemed. Despite her authority, her consideration, her position as Lady Monkton of Shank, any sudden action or sudden decision caused her a quiver of hesitation. And responsibility had brought to settle

on her face a perpetual shade of anxiety and of apprehension; her sidelong glance was the same which one sees in some shy animal who lives in fear.

"Shank is a heavy burden on you?" Dick asked her once, and she looked at him, answering with her lisp: "A heavy burden—a gweat joy!" Often he recalled the words as he moved about this incredible place of residence. "A heavy burden—a great joy!"

Dick felt, with the buoyancy of spirit which he was so rapidly regaining, that this burden was made too much of—was really unnecessary.

"What after all is there to be afraid of, M. Charles?" he protested, as they went their rounds together. "The pictures and all are so well known that a thief could never realize on them—how could he?"

Mr. Ventriss shook his head. "You don't understand, my dear boy. They'd hold 'em to ransom, as it was done at the Louvre.... and with taxes and all, we are poor at Shank. Yes: despite all I can do—and Piers was very successful with his investments, you know—Shank eats it all up and makes us poor.... To keep the very roof on the house costs us over £1,000 a year!"

"Still, with all these servants—and the door of the courtyard shut at night, I don't see why you fear," Dick repeated, glancing as he spoke at the enormous, oaken, iron-studded medieval portal, before which they stood.

"It's not from without that the danger will



come," M. Charles had replied and slipped his arms into his motor-coat.

This was on the morning when he was about to leave Shank. Dick had gone with him from room to room, from cabinet to cabinet, from picture to picture. Nothing escaped him—the patient Miss Lang at his elbow could hardly keep pace with the detail so lovingly observed by his watchful eyes. The care of the curtains of the King's bed, whose heavy embroideries of gold and silver thread might wear out the tissue they adorned—the constant inspection of bindings to guard against warping—checking each treasure of porcelain or of enamel—examination of the tapestries, where any loose stitch must be at once invisibly caught with matching thread—guarding of the arms and armor from encroaching rust—search for possible leaks or loosened stonework—talks with the head gardener about the roses and with the head forester about the deer—Dick had followed all this with admiration. No lover served his mistress more unselfishly than M. Charles served Shank: his passionate devotion looked to the past—not to the future. His task made the figures real that walked through the centuries in that setting. They were living people to M. Charles: he made them live to Dick, who avidly listened.

The huge, pursy, evil-tempered Archbishop who had laid heavy hand on the countryside from his palace at Shank: that gay light-o'-love of Henry VIII....the fair-skinned, burly, tennis-playing tyrant, with that scarlet plague, the Cardinal,

ever at his side; the later Monktons, owners and acolytes; Piers the first, who renounced an Earldom for the sake of Shank: Roger, who sold the very horses in his stable to buy the 9th Velasquez; Howard, who died from the shock of learning that a Holbein had been stolen from the gallery: Lady Molly, who refused a Duke to marry an antiquarian—these ghosts still peopled the house, and Dick felt that when M. Charles entered a gallery at one end, they had only just slipped out at the other.

Now Mr. Ventriss was leaving all this: he was to be absent for some time in France. He bade them farewell and his tall figure settled itself in a corner of his car. Moving from the Guard-house archway, the motor sped down the beech avenue and Charles Ventriss turned in his seat to wave a last farewell at Dick, who waved back. Both were smiling.....

A woman's figure, seated as usual before an easel, not far from where the car passed, put down her palette to gaze after it and the action recalled Dick to the fact that this seated artist had been an ever-present feature of the Park landscape since the day of his own arrival. Perchance M. Charles's zeal was contagious; perchance, which was true, his own mind had begun to accept the future instead of shivering away from it; certainly, he was suddenly conscious of a new sense of responsibility. Thus he rather surprised his hostess by saying to her with decision as the car disappeared among the trees: "I guess I'll stroll in the Park awhile and drop



into conversation with the artist yonder. If she's an American I'd like to know what kind of a one she is."

Lady Monkton said it would be a good idea. She looked badly, Richard thought, and owned to a poor night. "I am always easier when Charles is here," she confessed with a sigh. "It is such a responsibility: I shall not be sorry to give it up when the time comes."

She opened upon Richard her strange eyes with a half-smile of significant meaning that did not escape him. He flushed under it, his heart beat faster, and when she saw it, her smile deepened.

Spring seemed glowing into summer as Dick wandered about under the trees of the Park—keeping away from the deer in their shelter of bracken. On his way back, as he had declared, he passed by the artist's easel and glanced at the sketch thereon—accepting the permission of a slight nod. The sketch was not artistically striking, but it reproduced, if rather obviously, the scene before them.

From this angle the view was wholly of the older portion of Shank—a huddle of steep roofs and gables, tall chimneys and dominating towers, encircled with an old wall like a village in the background of an Italian painting. Dick knew little of that part of the building, where Elizabethan dwelling had been piled upon Norman abbey,—save as a seldom-entered labyrinth of courts, passages, brew and bake houses, cyrpts and stables. So when the artist in a

pleasant, but markedly American voice, asked him something about it, he merely shook his ignorant head.

"Well, I'd be just perfectly content if, like you, I could stay in the main part," was her comment; "it must be too wonderful."

He agreed that it was and studied her, feeling at ease. She was decidedly middle-aged and somewhat short, with plain hair drawn smoothly back in grey bands; firm, pleasant features and large, blue eyes. These eyes were both steady and quick and they lent her face intelligence. This lady wore an exceedingly tasteful dress of blue serge and on one wrist had a little, diamond-set watch. She was point-device in these things; unlike most artists noticed by the other. When Richard assumed that she was his countrywoman, she at once admitted the fact with a pleasant smile.

"Oh, yes—I spotted you right away—the first time. When you walked down the avenue yesterday, I said, that's an American boy—all right. My name is Byrd—Mrs. Byrd, and I am from Chicago. I'm boarding with the rector down there—" and she indicated the direction of the village.

"You love sketching, evidently," the young man said, quite re-assured by this harmless account of herself tendered by the blue-eyed lady.

"I do so. It keeps me out of doors, and when I paint I can see all *that* much better," she nodded at the Great House. "That sort of thing is new to me and I'm quite crazy about it.... We don't have 'em in Chicago!"



Dick laughed and raised his cap to move on—then a thought struck him. “You’ve been over the house, of course?” he asked her and Mrs. Byrd said she had.

“I go every Thursday—I guess they’re about sick of me,” said she, “but I’m always hoping the whim will strike ’em to show us a little more, you see....After all there are loads of rooms and things I haven’t seen and I would love to look at the Reynolds.”

Her appeal was plaintive and he replied that he knew how she felt. “I’ll speak to Lady Monkton and perhaps she can arrange it. You’re apt to be here on most clear days, aren’t you?” he asked her.

“Oh, I’m always somewhere about,” she replied; so he raised his cap and left her busily at work.

After he had disappeared within the grey walls, the artist laid down her brush and set her canvas aside, replacing it by a sketch-book which she took from the portfolio leaning against her stool. Its pages showed views of Shank all made in pencil, with great exactness of architectural detail—in wholly another style from the impressionist oil sketch on which she had been working. These drawings were covered with annotations, while some of the doors and windows were numbered in tiny, clear digits. All were of the back part, the older portion of the Great House. Mrs. Byrd of Chicago drew from the cover of this sketch-book a carefully drawn ground-plan of the whole building, a plan

showing court-yards, rooms and galleries, halls and stair-cases—and then, spreading it smooth upon the easel, she set to work with a fine pointed pencil, to make corresponding digits upon this plan. She spent an hour at this, working with minute care: after which she closed the book and put it away, picked up the easel, portfolio and stool, and thus laden began slowly to walk in the direction of the village.

Shankmere lies in one long, straggling street on the main road from London to Tunbridge Wells—a busy, modern, active town with an air of ignoring the Great House which dominates it from the hill near-by. Iron gates, with intricate armorial bearings, open directly upon the main street into the beech avenue of the Park. Mrs. Byrd, however, did not pass through these gates but turned aside to thread her way under the new leaves of the trees, till she struck a little path leading to the Church and to the vicarage which adjoined it. This was a small, comfortable house in villa-style, quite modern and very cheerful—which was known as Shank Paddock, and commanded a wide prospect of the Park. Ever since the War, the Waverleys had been glad to let a couple of rooms to specially-chosen inmates and they found Mrs. Byrd an agreeable tenant, who never asked the price of anything. She was quiet and independent in her ways, content to go sketching around the country-side, and she gave no trouble except when she desired to have a fire in her rooms on evenings which the vicar thought “stuffy.” To be sure, she in-



sisted on calling Mr. Waverley the rector and speaking of the vicarage as the rectory, notwithstanding the fact that he carefully explained the difference to her. She had heard him out with steady blue eyes fixed on his face and had replied: "You don't say? So I've been making an ecclesiastical mess of terms all my life? Well, I don't want to be adding to the cares of the already overburdened Church of England, now do I?"

Mr. Waverley had hastened, with the most earnest reassurances on that point, to beg her not to take the error too seriously and Mrs. Byrd had promised that she wouldn't. There had been a gleam in her glance which puzzled the good vicar and he later avowed among his friends that there was much in the transatlantic personality which he failed to understand.....

Mrs. Byrd's sitting-room had one long window opening on the lawn, which on this pleasant afternoon stood open. Seated on the sill awaiting her, chin in hands, she beheld her friend Miss Jean Lang.

Miss Lang had honored the spring day with a frock which was a little more frilly and less severe than her habitual business dress. Frills meant holiday to Jean and she had an hour or so to herself that afternoon. She waved at the approaching figure, which hurried toward her with a rapid step despite its burden; and Mrs. Byrd smiled welcome upon her guest.

"Well, my lamb," was her greeting, "you look as fresh as the May."

"And I feel as dull as November," the girl answered, taking the easel out of her hand as they stepped into the room. "Such a pile of tasks as Mr. Ventriss has left for me! And just when I was thinking of asking for a vacation."

"You'll get that later, no doubt," her friend comforted her.

"Maybe I will and maybe I won't," said Jean forlornly. "My mother's letter said that Biddy, my old nurse, you know, has been pretty bad with the 'flu. She needs me, but I'm afraid she'll have to wait."

Mrs. Byrd had laid aside her scarf: put her sketch-book and color-box on a near-by table and was soon seated behind the tea-tray which the maid had just brought in. She smiled upon her visitor, showing that she had white teeth as well as blue eyes. Somehow Jean felt that she was younger than her hair: she seemed so purely healthy and vigorous: and her clothes were so fashionable in cut and to Jean's mind, so expensive! On her part, the elder woman looked with pleasure at the girl's erect and pliant shape—as graceful as any Frenchwoman's—her clear skin, just a thought freckled and her individual face framed in black hair. Mrs. Byrd simply longed to put really good clothes on her, and proper accessories. "She's just the sort to dress," was her reflection. "With that white skin and lovely figure—*quelle jolie laide* she would make, if I had her at home!" Aloud, she wisely observed: "But you love your work, don't you? That's why you chose it?"



"Of course I love it—I love anything to do with books and pictures and the past," Miss Lang assented, eating cake with appetite. "I chose it because I'd heard so much about Shank and its glories from my nurse, who was once in service there. She told me all about the collections, so vividly, that I jumped at the chance to come—although the pay is much less than I could get, I know. That's the odd thing about Lady Monkton and Mr. Ventris—they'll spend hundreds of pounds on something—while they keep me down to the last sixpence!"

"People are like that," Mrs. Byrd said.

"Of course I've learned a lot that's useful. Do you know, after all she told me, Biddy hated my coming to Shank? She made a great to do....and mother writes she still worries over it....she says its a frightening house."

"How funny!"

"Isn't it? She doesn't explain. She just shakes her head, poor old dear!"

"Perhaps she had a disagreeable experience. Was it in Sir Piers' time?" the American queried.

"I never asked her—but of course mother says the same. Biddy won't talk about it. Sometimes I wonder," Jean went on reflectively, "if it isn't the same that I feel myself at moments. Shank *is* frightening. Shank's so old and so wonderful and so valuable—it just sits there and keeps us all busy....I laughed at Biddy first but I don't now....Think of the size of it, and the splendor—century after century flaunting those treasures—and its people have no lives of their

own; they just serve Shank. Yes: to a certain kind of imagination, I think it's rather awe-inspiring."

Mrs. Byrd heard her attentively.

"Have you ever been to Venice?" she remarked. "No?....well, it was night the first time I ever saw the Piazza....San Marco frightened me dreadfully....There it squatted in the dusk like a great golden spider with a humped back and gleaming eyes and brilliant, deadly antennae waving in front of it....I felt as if it were going to spring like some antediluvian beast....Yes, it takes strength of mind, Jean, to live with the Past. Your old nurse felt that, I guess. Shank was too much for her...."

Sympathy of this sort had been rare in the girl's experience. She yielded herself to the current with a sigh of pleasure. She told about the books, the manuscripts, the pictures; about the daily routine; about the enthusiasm of Mr. Ventris, his skill and his knowledge; about Lady Monkton's nervousness and her complete seclusion since the death of Sir Piers; and about the rumors flying over the village that the good-looking American was a Claimant.....

"Do you think it's true?" the elder lady enquired, much interested. "I've heard the story naturally, everybody has....but I've been in Philadelphia. It's a hard-headed place and everybody knows everybody else's grandfather. 'Tisn't as if he came from New York, where people drift on the tide of business exactly like sea-weed, my dear! I never met a romantic



Philadelphian—Quakers aren't, you know—so I can't believe this!"

"Mr. Ventriss must believe it," Jean told her; "he's evidently fond of Mr. Monkton."

"Should you say Ventriss's judgment was to be trusted?"

The question was of the idlest, yet somehow it stiffened Miss Lang. She said: "Why, I think so," and was silent, anxious not to be indiscreet. Mrs. Byrd, pushed by her own interest, asked one or two intimate questions, only to be met with similar reserve. She saw that the girl's reticence sprung less from a deliberate policy than from a dignified nature, so Mrs. Byrd liked her even better for being no gossip.

The Americans turned their conversation to the past and heard all about the history of Shank and of the Monktons, and how, by the great skill of Charles Ventriss and his flair for discovering rarities in the little-known villages of Italy and France, the libraries and manuscript collection had been built up and enriched. She told how his search in the ecclesiastical portion, the Archbishop's room, had resulted in his finding the secret cupboard which contained the *Treyze Saintes Hystoires*.....

Mrs. Byrd seemed to have more than the usual interest in, and some rather unusual knowledge of such things. She avowed a longing to see the *Treyze Hystoires*—but Jean couldn't promise to show it to her, not while Mr. Ventriss was away.

"I guess they keep all those things under lock and key?" the lady said, and Jean nodded:

"Yes indeed: we've a special cabinet that's like a safe, fireproof of course, in the Manuscript Room," and she described it.

"Well, it takes patience to find such things and knowledge to recognize them when you find them," Mrs. Byrd admitted. "We in the States haven't got much of either; so we pay the other fellow to carry them off. I guess Mr. Ventriss has sold some things to the Metropolitan....I read about his selling something just before the War—to St. Louis, I think it was?"

"Yes, indeed....he got nearly £10,000 that year, and do you know? it nearly all went to Shank! By that, I mean that he gave most of it to Sir Piers to buy a Holbein that just completed the group."

"You don't say—! That *was* nice of him!"

"That's what he is—it's his passion, you see."

Tea drunk, shadows had fallen on the lawn and golden mist lingered on the tree-tops. Jean rose with a sigh. She liked Mrs. Byrd so much!....The window, which still stood open, had an awkward handle, so that when it caught in Jean's sash, there was a slam, the table was hit and Mrs. Byrd's paint-box scattered its tubes upon the floor. Jean stooped at once, disregarding the "Oh, never mind, my dear!" with which the owner had sprung alertly forward for the same purpose. Both bent, then the Scots girl suddenly checked, with a strange look on her face. A small, heavy object lay on the carpet among the tubes of paint—rather a startling object, being a perfectly practicable revolver.



There was a pause: Mrs. Byrd stood up with some tubes of paint in one hand and the revolver in the other. She looked square into Jean's eyes.

"I didn't mean to leave that in my paint-box," she said in her ordinary voice and without a trace of embarrassment; "I usually wear it on me. It's an old habit, and one I contracted as a girl, under circumstances I shall tell you about some day.... Lucky it didn't go off and frighten the Waverleys out of their wits! Must you go? Good-bye, my dear."

From the window, Mrs. Byrd watched, for a moment, the vanishing figure of Miss Lang among the trees. As she turned back into the room, she paused, glancing at what she still held.

"My dear Georgie," said Mrs. Byrd to herself: "You're getting careless!"

Miss Lang, too, was frowning as she hurried across the Park.

## CHAPTER XI

### ANGELS AND VISITORS

TO live in such a place was to undergo many curious revelations, by whose light Dick came better to understand the attitude of its inhabitants. Why Lady Monkton dwelt therein apart, as in a different country, began to be explained less by a seclusion of mourning than by the fact that so exotic an atmosphere tended to put one out of key with the outside world. He doubted if anyone could ever get quite used to it. In the first place, there was the startling perfection of all the familiar objects surrounding one's life. Things one handled or beheld daily, the color and shape of the ewer, or frame of the mirror, or a vivid glimpse, swiftly caught, of some great picture through an arrased doorway—either one succumbed to their spell, being sensitive to beauty, shut all else out, or one came almost to resent it, to be hostile. This latter was not Dick's state of mind, but he recognized that it might be. Save on rare business, Lady Monkton seldom went beyond the park gates, and her guest found, especially after Mr.



Ventris's departure, that he was content to do the like, to look about, and to dream. So much was to be seen, and so rich was the tissue of his dreams!

Much of her time Denise Monkton, too, spent in apparent dreaming. Dick came upon her more than once as he roamed the sumptuous chambers and galleries, perhaps studying their contents, perhaps merely delighting in the richness of their effect. One afternoon he wandered into the Green Gallery, through whose windows the tint of its moss-velvet and wide-spaced tapestry was repeated in the turf and the yews and the newly budded hedges. Breezes slipped in and out of the open casements, birds twittered and were gone in a flash. As he walked that long perspective of diminishing beams and windows, he saw, at the further end of it, the figure of the secretary, the girl Jean Lang, standing tall and still in front of what he took to be the closed doors of a medieval shrine. This shrine he had noticed before, with the doors which sealed the centre compartment and whose carving was flanked by two paintings, faint, fantastic pictures which he had in his own mind set down to Piero di Cosimo. Here must be concealed some precious marvel, and Dick hastened his pace toward the secretary, eager for this chance to see what lay behind. The girl gravely turned her head at his approach, but her attention seemed centered on the carven doors, which were of ancient wood as black as jet with a design of angels bearing torches in their raised grasp.

Upon one of the roses which formed a part of the design, Miss Lang's long hand was laid, while the other gestured the young man to silence. Then she pulled open the doors and stood aside that he might look. . . . but it was not at all upon what he had expected to see.

The angels, with their cressets and roses, were not the doors of a shrine but the shutters to a window, through which he found himself suddenly gazing down into the chapel below. Sunset, flaming through its glass, lit multicolored fires on the cool marble pavement. At the chancel, in the Bishop's Stall, Lady Monkton had placed herself and fallen into reverie. Crimson cushions and embroidered banners threw her white dress into relief; her scarf gave the illusion of a coif; and the sunbeam, falling on the cross of Marguerite de Valois, spattered her gown with prismatic sparkles. . . . Her pose was full of unconscious grace, her gaze was fixed, her face in shadow; yet there arose to the watchers above, a strong, a definite emanation of unhappiness, of unrest. . . .

Miss Lang softly closed the shutters and the two glanced at one another.

"Thanks," Dick said gratefully, "for letting me look. It was a picture I shan't soon forget. I didn't realize how much she mourns her husband."

They were walking down the gallery side by side, and Miss Lang did not quickly answer.

"They say," at length she proffered; "her people, I mean, that she has done this always. One



comes upon her here and there, sitting, thinking. I don't know if she grieves—perhaps it's just her way of enjoying Shank."

"No doubt." He looked, however, as though he thought this explanation unbecomingly matter-of-fact. "Yet one sees plainly how she feels. And they were great companions, weren't they, she and Sir Piers? Congenial and fond of the same things?"

"Oh, of course, Lady Monkton is crazy about Shank," the secretary assented: then, as they had reached the door of the gallery, she gave her companion a stiff, half-smile of farewell and turned quickly down the stairway before he could prevent her. The young man regretted a little; he would have liked to talk longer with this sensible, if non-committal young person. But when he tried, she always slipped away.

Silent absorption in the miracle of their surroundings appeared to be the keynote of the place and of his life therein, which was wholly taken up with visual and pictorial impressions. Nobody seemed inclined for conversation any more than this reticent Scottish girl, and the importance of people and of social contacts appeared less than it would have been almost anywhere else. Shank was, in reality, completely distracting. Yet it must not be supposed that they lacked visitors, and indeed Richard soon saw what the guardianship of such possessions entailed in tact and social instinct. Scarcely a day passed without pilgrims, letters of introduction, the friends of friends, students of all

types with their varying demands on Lady Monkton's time and energy. There was the friend who drove over to luncheon from a mouldering moat-house in the neighborhood, where the bare walls had been stripped to glut the London auctions, and who shook her head enviously over the serene richness of Shank. This lady had square shoulders, a high-bridged nose, and auburn hair. She began her conversation with young Monkton by asking him squarely if he had "lots and lots of dollars, as you all have?" and startled him a good deal on his embarrassed negative by avowing "well, then, you won't do for my girl at any rate!"

All of luncheon was spent for the American in these breath-taking revelations of British frankness, and in his realizing, by the time it was over, that Lady Monkton with her evasive tact and grave subtlety of glance, was no more English than he was himself. Then came Mr. Lawrence Yockley, the antiquarian, with a secretary, a terrier, and a monocle, who dictated to the secretary in corners while the terrier mounted guard over the group. He was writing a book and expected lunch sent out to him in whatever part of the building he happened to be at work, while he glared ferociously at Dick through the monocle, whenever that unoffending young man chanced to draw near.....

The antiquarian was followed by a fashionable French painter, the enthusiastic M. Delmas de Rambouillet, who spent two days following Denise Monkton about with his tireless flow of



Gallic raptures, and left her, she acknowledged, "utterly exhausted." He wasn't writing a book—but everyone at Shank would have been thankful had his interest in the collections been less talkative. A solemn Committee from the Society of Antiquaries next had to be given audience, demanding a special room and Miss Lang's entire time, for the purpose of their researches into the life history of that master collector, Piers I. The vicar, Mr. Waverley, came often. He too was writing something and had to have access to the Manuscript Room.....

In addition to these visitors, somehow there was always a stranger with a letter from somebody, who must be guided, shepherded, lectured to, and seen safely beyond the gates. Then there was the usual Thursday gathering of tourists, which was larger at this season than at any other; copyists and photographers who were not content with writing letters, but appeared in person and argued with Dolly at the gatehouse. Richard began to feel a certain sympathy with the absent curator, whose letters were filled with admonitions showing where his thoughts turned, and with the nervous weariness which was so noticeable in the mistress of the house. The Past seemed to lay all its rich weight upon them.....

Meanwhile, he did not forget his promise to Mrs. Byrd and spent a pleasant morning conducting that lady through the parts of the house not generally shown. She turned out to be individual as well as appreciative, with indications

of taste, of knowledge, and of nice perception. Particularly did he notice this with gratitude when they were crossing from wing to wing of the building by one end of the terrace, at the other end of which Lady Monkton's figure was to be seen seated in her chair, and Mrs. Byrd asked no questions, did not so much as glance in the direction of that interesting lady. This well-bred nicety fitted in with Mrs. Byrd's blue eyes and the elegance of her white linen frock and its appointments, all of which testified to the dominant talent of his countrywomen. As they walked, she chattered freely in admiring commentary, which had often a quaint little tang to it.

When she gazed up at the Archbishop, who appeared, in the noon light, especially flown with insolence, her remark was simply, "Well, I'm glad he's dead!"

This was uttered with such energy that her guide could only laugh as he reminded her: "Ah, but if the evil that men do lives after them—!"

The group of what she called "those Reynolds people," delighted her, "and I'm glad to see them here," said she, "in this sort of a room, I mean. They never look happy in Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum makes them cross. Can you imagine how Lady Molly would feel if she were stared at by Israel Boscovitch and his sweetie—both chewing gum?"

But in front of the "great" Hoppner she stood silent to look, with a light upon her face which seemed a reflection of its immortal radiance....



He showed her everything, the jewels and porcelains in the cabinets, the *Vierge à la Carafe*, smiling strangely above the oblationary bowl of flowers placed beneath it—an offering which had not once been forgotten in three centuries. In the Manuscript Room, Miss Lang came forward to greet her friend and to place treasures before her, noting, not without surprise, that Mrs. Byrd handled them with a practised touch.

“You are used to them, aren’t you?” she remarked.

“Oh, I’ve a few of my own stuck off somewhere in that greedy way we have,” the other answered discontently. “I love ’em, so that a thing like this”—and she tapped the Monkton missal—“just turns me green with envy. I’d been thinking hard thoughts of the Monktons; but why should I, when I know how it feels? Take the thing away, Jeanie! My father was a deacon of the Congregational Church, but somehow as a moral influence he seems rather far away.”

Her friend smiled, a sudden young smile in her grey-green eyes. She locked the great volume in its case, while Mrs. Byrd looked comically on.

“Of course we’ve our private robber barons in Chicago,” she remarked, as they came out from the Manuscript Room and walked across the two courts toward the guard-house; “but they’re modest and retiring compared to the lords of Shank. The collections are wonderful enough in themselves, but when one looks at their setting—!”

Miss Lang, waving farewell, turned back to her work; Richard was left alone to accompany Mrs. Byrd on her way.

"It seems rather stagey, Shank," he agreed glancing over his shoulder. "Sometimes it seems to be all set up for a play that never happens."

Mrs. Byrd cocked her head at this.

"Never is the wrong word, my Philadelphia friend," was her retort. "Fate's a clever stage manager, even if his entr'actes seem sometimes rather long. He seldom wastes a good *décor*.... You wait a while, and I shouldn't be surprised if the curtain went up quite unexpectedly one of these days."

Her voice was lightly playful, but he had cause to remember before very long that there had been a significant steadiness in her blue gaze. The words stuck in his mind.



## CHAPTER XII

### BEHIND THE BACCHANTE

**R**AIN fell, turning the afternoon to silver grey. On the courtyard the sound was dull; on the terrace, delicate. The trees in the Park stood immobile in the soft fall, each wearing a veil of mist: parapets and towers ascended into the clouds and were hidden. Dick sat in the smaller library and read through long, tranquil hours. Lady Monkton had gone to London for a night or two. Mr. Ventriss had been absent nearly three weeks.... Dick did not mind being left alone....there was so much to see. When he raised his eyes from his book, it was to encounter the gaze of the Archbishop—he that built Shank, who sat majestically above the mantelpiece in robes that fell about him like suave, crimson flames. In his grasp, he held an ivory statuette, a smooth-limbed Venus, which his fingers caressed. All of the man seemed to be revealed by the voluptuous touch of those fine and cruel hands.

“Mr. Monkton, may I speak to you just one minute?” Miss Lang, standing on the thres-

hold to prefer this request, was by no means the Miss Lang whom Dick was accustomed to see, absorbed, active, busy about her work. Her face, her voice, were hesitant and troubled.

"To be sure you may," said he, laid his book down and jumped up.

"I'm so worried—something so very odd has happened." The secretary spoke in a little burst of anxiety. "Today you know is public day, and Dolly took five tourists through the rooms. I was so busy.... I see now that I ought to have gone myself, but she has done it hundreds of times.... One man has not come out with the rest—he seems to have disappeared!"

"Disappeared in the house?"

"That's it. Dolly didn't notice his absence till they were nearly back at the Guard-house. She returned of course—hunted, called—no trace! Then she came at once to me in the Scriptorium. What will Lady Monkton say?" Jean looked as she felt—decidedly alarmed.

"Probably he grew tired and turned back ahead of all the rest," was Richard's re-assuring suggestion, but she shook her head.

"Gapper was in the Guard-house all the time. He is certain that no one crossed the court-yard.... I came to you to know if Lady Monkton left word where she might be reached?"

"No," Dick answered, "not with me. She had been worried by some message she had just received by telephone.... some business matter. I wanted to go with her, but she wouldn't hear of it. Naturally, I asked no questions: she ex-



pected to return in a day or two. But I shouldn't worry if I were you. Gapper must be mistaken." He spoke lightly, but her look did not brighten.

"That's not quite all, you see—there's something more, Mr. Monkton....Dolly says the missing man is the same who went over the house several times before. I spoke of it to Mr. Ventris. A foreigner, he seemed to be....Once he went through with Mrs. Byrd. I've already rung up to know what she knows of him—but she's out. I'm sending Gapper with a note to tell her we're hunting him."

Dick saw that the affair was serious in her eyes, and therefore began to take it more seriously. "Do you fear a plan to rob the house?" he enquired gravely.

"It's hard to define what I fear exactly—but yes, I suppose so. A man might hide himself and slip out at night-fall....That's the chance. Yet I don't want the police and all that fuss; her ladyship would hate it....Mr. Ventris has always said to deal with any problem by means of our own people, as far as possible. But that's what worries me....whom to consult. Hays has only been butler since old Basset died—I've never trusted him—I've seen him tipsy more than once. Gapper and Fencotes are both too old; and as for Laking the housekeeper, she'd be worse then useless....What do you think we ought to do?"

"First of all," he answered briskly, "you and I must make a thorough search without saying

anything to anyone. What time is it—five o'clock? Getting dark, too,—have you a light, Miss Lang?"

"There's an electric torch in the Guard-house."

"Well, this will be useful too," and young Monkton picked up, from a cigar-stand, a box of matches. "If the man's there, we'll find him . . . . But I'm simply sure that he left early, unobserved."

"Oh, I hope you're right!"

The Guard-house wore its customary cheerful aspect, half-office, half-shop, with a little red glow of fire all ready to brew Gapper his tea. Jean secured the torch: her companion not without bravado picked up the poker and then they mounted the painted staircase to the State Apartments. These rooms, shown to visitors at Shank, were all en suite, with the exception of the Chapel and the Great Dining Hall, which occupied the ground floor of the main Jacobean building. As these had been visited by the tourist party first that afternoon, and Dolly was positive that the visitor was still with the group when it ascended to the second story, Jean felt it hardly worth while to enter them again.

"You see, they offer no place to hide in and lead nowhere," she told her companion. "The State Rooms have all the valuables in them—and the best pictures—the King's Bed-room too has all that argentry." She used the old term naturally, adding: "It would be there if anywhere a thief would try for."



They entered the Green Gallery. The dusky moss-tinted hangings embroidered in faded gold thread absorbed the light from the small-paned windows—so that they stepped into shadow.... But there was no one there. The Mandarin Room next gleamed with magnificent gold and red lacquer; with the inimitable deep blue of old Chinese porcelains and brocades... The Queen's Room, where Dick with careful hand lifted aside the rose-brocade curtains and bed furniture: no one there. Then they stepped into the Antechamber, rich, almost coquettish, with its mirrors and sconces—and where through the long windows, the afternoon light fell clear. Jean opened tiny panelled doors into powder-closets—empty....looked behind the arras, opened the doors of vacant presses, lifted the lid of carved chests filled with vestments and velvets....nothing.

"Certainly," she admitted, "there's no sign of anyone—not even Lady Monkton's ghost."

"Which Lady Monkton walks?" he asked her idly: looking up the shaft of a huge chimney to the sky.

"The last, of course; Sir Piers' first wife. The one that drowned herself....Dolly's seen her—she runs through the rooms carrying her baby."

He winced. "She must have been insane, poor thing!" he commented, "to take her life, like that."

"I don't know," was Miss Lang's unexpectedly blunt reply. "She had cause enough if all they say be true—" then hurriedly she added:

"But no doubt it isn't. I've never seen her ghost myself....And I see nobody here and nothing be out of place. You must be right—the man got tired and slipped off home, and Gapper is an ass."

"I know I'm right," said Dick with confidence, and smiled at her clearing face in friendly wise. Jean, a little shyly, smiled back. She wondered if Americans all had this friendly attitude....It made things far, far easier.....

The Rubens Gallery was vacant of human presence from end to end. On the walls, the shapes of gods and men strove gigantically together....the faintest tinge of western gold came in through the windows. Beyond, another room led into the King's Bedchamber. Here the secretary searched everywhere; the floors, the chimney, the cupboard drawers. When Dick saw her lift the lids of pot-pourri jars, he laughed aloud till Jean caught the infection and the stately rooms rang with their mirth.... Finally Miss Lang announced that she was satisfied—only she must look just here. *Here* was a little door at the head of the King's bed which her key opened, revealing a stairway...."I'll be running up to the empty rooms above these for a glimpse," said she. "The dust will show if anyone has been there. Stay here, Mr. Monkton, I'll be down in a minute."

"Look thoroughly if it will ease your mind," he told her: and her light foot-fall sounded on the steps and above his head. Then silence. Meanwhile it had begun to grow dusk; shadows



lurked in the corners and behind the curtains of the vast bed. The silver tables and jars and sconces began to look like lead.... Dick wandered to the window to stare out.... Rain fell thicker and more steadily over the terrace, the hedges, the rose-garden. He took out his watch—Yes, the time was getting on and one must be soon thinking about dinner.... He was not English enough to have been thinking about tea. He went to the foot of the little stair and called up. No answer—and no sound of a returning foot-fall.

Rooms like these were a little eerie—when one reflected how the centuries slept in them. What if the centuries awoke? Would they be hostile? No doubt the Archbishop, the King, the Beauty would find little to please them today.... He smiled at his own fancies, but more in satisfaction to find that his nerves were so far returned to normal that these grey shadows and echoing rooms and eerie surroundings with ever the chance of a lurking burglar somewhere hidden in them, brought to him no distaste, but rather a sensation of pleasure.... Still, Miss Lang was a long time.....

Wonderful the vista of these galleries, opening one into another, door ever opposite door, so that the eye had the perspective so far as it could reach, of carved portal, of painting, of tapestry. How past pageantry had peopled them with gold and scarlet, with color and life! He would love to have seen the bright stream of costume in the setting of this now empty gal-

lery, whose ninety feet stretched before him, silent and vacant and dim in the fading grey. But—*what moved there?* Dick strode to the door, straining his eyes.... Was the long gallery empty? Or did a shadow come from out the shadows—drifting nearer toward him like a puff of smoke—but moving as a human being moves....? And where was Miss Lang?

He couldn't wait: he ran. Poker in one hand, electric torch in the other, he sprang across the Antechamber; across the intervening room and his heels sounded on the oaken floor of the Rubens Gallery. For a breath as he ran his eyes caught something—a man's figure—before it made a sudden turn aside. The place was empty; empty clear to the end of it—but Dick had seen. He slowed his pace and looked carefully on every side. One of the huge cartoons—ten feet long at least and almost as high, had swung out from its place and what lay behind it was not wall but blackness—the blackness of a narrow, twisting, turret stair. The steps of it went up and curved out of sight, and down and down and turned beyond the view. Which way had the man gone?

Dick had no time to consider what to do,—barely time indeed to step back from the opening and crush himself flat behind the canvas shield. His head lay against the bosom of a monstrous Bacchante with grapes dangling from her ears.. Steps were coming down the stair, preceded by a little, dancing white spot made by a torch like his own. Dick dared not breathe....he had the



poker ready—his feeling was not of fear but of pleasurable excitement—a feeling which properly belonged to the Dick he knew best; and this exultation of his natural and recovered recklessness probably accounted for what followed. He held the poker ready for a blow when the burglar should come out. The steps passed. When he realized the man was going on down, he looked quickly, to see that a tall figure with face turned into the shadow, a light held low and a parcel under the arm which made a shapeless heap of deeper darkness, was already turning the curve of the stair. Dick held himself for an instant and then at once followed. The stair was dark as pitch for the curve hid the man's light and he dared not use his own. He clung to the wall, keeping his feet on the broad end of the treads and went steadily down, down and down. Once his haste brought him almost upon the unknown....but he checked in time. Their footfalls went on and on as one.

Finally the stair ended. A stone space revealed itself, semi-circular and with a narrow passage running out of it. The man's light, far ahead, gleamed, here and there on the walls, while near the ceiling, narrow slits let in a faint greyness from without. The place smelt very damp and mouldy: it must be the oldest part of Shank. Dick knew little of that part of the Norman building—a mass of passages twisting under arches through the altered stonework—but he did not stop to think—he followed on.

Ahead of him the light still moved, much

further off since Dick deemed it prudent to hang back, while the man in front hastened. Dick could no longer see his figure but followed his light.....

Then suddenly, away down that black passage, something happened....The light went out—there were cries, blows, a scuffle. Dick began to run. Towards an indeterminate, entangled group that swayed and fought, breathing savagely, but otherwise silent, he hurried, throwing his torchlight before him as he came and calling on the men to stop....He had no wish to join the quarrel; every wish to find out who they were that fought. Poker and all, he was in it before he knew, striking and being struck. He dodged a blow, hit out wildly, was pulled down. His torch was knocked away; darkness followed; everything grew confused in the mêlée. He was aware of struggle, of a loud noise like a shot, —of a high shriek in the midst of it—then a staggering crash, a fall—nothing.



## CHAPTER XIII

### THE DARKNESS OF THE CRYPT

UNCONSCIOUSNESS, slowly dispersing like a fog, let sensation through at first in the form of sharp pain. Dick slowly realized this pain and suffering, then the crumpled and helpless position in which he lay, then that, violent though the headache was, he could still move and think; and finally that somebody near at hand was sobbing and ejaculating. Thick darkness enveloped him, hiding the source of these sounds. "What's the matter? Who is it?" he asked bewildered. "What in the name of—"

But the sobs cut him short with a cry that was more like joy. "Oh, Mr. Monkton—then it *is* you! I hoped it was, but couldn't be sure. Are you badly hurt?"

"That's Miss Lang's voice," he told himself. Feeling partly stupefied, he began to move; raised himself, holding his head, and replied: "Why is it so infernally dark? No...my head's beastly but otherwise I'm all right—that is, unless I've gone blind?"

The agony of this question caused her hurried, "Oh no, no, no! It is pitch dark. We must be in a cellar or crypt of some sort. As near as I can calculate, it's in the Norman wing, perhaps under the Abbey."

"But how did we get here? Wasn't there a fight? I seem to remember a racket—?"

"Yes. We must have fallen through an open trap. You went first and broke my fall. I thought it was you but it was all so horrible—and so pitch dark." She made a shaky, brave attempt to laugh. "I tell you, it was awful to sit here and wonder if it was the burglar that lay there and what he would do to me when he came to!"

"Gosh—it must have been! Wait a minute—" she could hear him move about, stretching his arms and legs. "Well, I'm all here it seems—pretty well bruised and stiff but still going and—Lord, how my head does ache! Are you hurt?"

"My wrist is sprained, I think. I can't use it."

Memory began to come fully back to Dick. "How did you get into it? I saw somebody and ran—but where were you all that time?"

"I went up to the third floor by the little stair. I had an idea to look through those empty rooms, but I found nothing. When I came back you had gone. I passed the little door under the Rubens, it was open and I could hear feet going downstairs. I must have been just behind you. There was a long passage and a row going on at the end of it—you had the light in your hands, didn't you?"



“Yes. It was knocked out. And then—?”

“I ran to see if I could help—they had you down—I tried to get the poker and then somebody pushed me and there was shooting—but it was all so blind—!”

“I remember.”

“Well, then we fell through the floor together—you underneath. And that’s all.”

“You were frightfully brave,” the young man said warmly.

“I would have been far more sensible if I hadn’t been,” Jean answered miserably enough, “we wouldn’t be here now!”

This was undeniable, yet Dick denied it. “I don’t know—they might have turned their attention to you after they’d finished with me. What brutes! Did you see how many there were?”

“Two, I fancy—but of course I couldn’t tell. I thought—” she checked and broke instead into a moan. “My sprain is so bad! What can we do, Mr. Monkton? How are we going to get out?”

“Wait a bit,” the young man answered. His voice was steady and alive; it comforted Jean, notwithstanding the pain of her wrist, and her fright and misery. “Don’t give up. We’ll work it out somehow. They’ll find us, you know—though it may take some hours.”

“But suppose those—brutes—shut down the trap on top of us?” Her voice quivered and Richard swallowed down the pang of the unpleasant probability.

"I won't suppose any such thing," he combated vigorously. "Look here—take a long breath—the air in here is stuffy enough, but it's fresh—you can feel it move in a draught. Moreover—it's dark, I know, but it's not pitch dark now, is it? I can see a faint greyness; can't you?"

"I don't know," said Jean, rather doubtfully.

"Well, I do. It's decidedly different in a place that's all shut up. Remember, it's night outside anyway. I'm positive that by morning some light will get down here." He ran on, fighting down her panic as best he might. "You've been so brave—why, you won't give up now? And—wait," He felt about, moving over the floor. "Yes, it must be a crypt: here's a big pillar—I can't put my arm round it. The roof will be low—it must be or we would have been worse hurt.. Yes: give me your hand, Miss Lang, feel....? The trap must be just over our heads, the draught from it is plain."

Jean did acknowledge she felt a current of air that moved against her face.

"If I *only* hadn't held the matches in my hand!" she lamented. "If only I'd put them safely in my pocket!"

"Have you hunted for them at all?"

"Do you think it's worth while?"

"Yes, I do," was his cheerful answer. "There's a chance they might have spilled out of the box as they fell. My torch, worse luck, would be no good, even if I found it. The smash was the last thing I really remember.....Now, you sit still where you are and I'll hunt awhile on the floor."



Jean murmured that the matches would be useless without the box, but the truth was that she was tired out with pain and terror. That long, long period, when she had shuddered there in the darkness between the anguish in her wrist and the fear of her unknown companion, had told on her courage. She crawled to the pillar to which Richard's hand guided her and rested her back against it. When she spoke to him, her voice shook:

"I'll—I'll be better—not so silly in a minute. But—you'll keep on talking to me while you search, Mr Monkton—won't you?"

"All the time," he replied in a brisk, matter-of-fact voice and kept his word; for Jean could hear him crawling about on his hands and knees and feeling the uneven floor with his fingers, while he kept up a running fire of talk which was almost gay. And so confident was the voice that came to her, now here, now there, out of the darkness, so cheerful withal, that Jean was not half so surprised as she expected when he announced—after a long time, it is true—that he had found the match box and with three or four matches still inside it.

"Now, this is all right!" was his jubilation. "Now we shall see. I'm crawling toward you till I feel that draught again. We'll have to waste one match on a look around. Perhaps there will be some wood lying about which we could use as a torch.... Anyway, here goes...."

There was a scratch, a blinding flash; both turned their faces upward; and then the girl

wildly shrieked. At the shriek, Dick dropped the match, which went out, but not before he had also seen. There was a jet-black oblong just over their heads and from that open trap there hung down, straight and stiff and dreadfully near,—*the arm of a man.*

It wasn't easy to command oneself after that, but Dick knew it must be done. He had caught the panic gleam in his companion's eyes and he did not hesitate to shake her by the shoulder somewhat roughly, while his steady voice said: "Look here—you musn't go off....! Don't you see he can't hurt us?....he's dead. We've got to get out of this. Get a grip on yourself. I'm going to strike another light—keep quiet!"

Jean obeyed: glad that there was someone to obey. She did not scream nor move nor even look during what seemed to her the long life of another match. She heard Monkton move away, light in hand. When the darkness fell again, his voice came with it.... "There are some empty boxes here—I'm dragging them over. Are you still standing right under the trap? Stay there, and speak to me so that I'll know where to bring them. The ceiling's low and I'll pile them up—but I can't waste any light...."

The work was heavy, but he managed it. Jean held the match for him to pile the boxes one on another. When the last step had been placed, she saw Dick's head and body vanish through the trap in horrible nearness to that stiff, protruding arm.... There was a struggle—the top box fell over—the match went out—but in an instant she heard his voice sound overhead:



"It's all right—I'm in the corridor. Now don't worry, Miss Lang, it may take me a few minutes but I'll get help and hurry back—don't, don't be frightened—and don't move. I'll not be long."

As a matter of fact the time was only a few minutes, long as it seemed to the girl in the crypt. Dick found himself at the end of the stone passage and at the entrance to various vague, vaulted spaces which he could not identify. Except for the huddled body, lying on the edge of the open trap-door, his last match showed him nothing out of the way. He dared not go exploring about in the darkness for fear of other traps, and he had just decided that the only thing to do was to mount the stairs by which he had come down, when he became aware, away down the long passage, of lights and voices hurrying toward him. Much relieved, he gave a shout and hurried toward this rescue party, which consisted of three persons. Gapper, with Thomas, one of the gardeners, under the apparent leadership of Mrs. Byrd of Chicago. That lady, Dick noticed with astonishment, wore an over-coat and carried in an efficient manner, an apparently genuine revolver.

"Oh there you are!" was her brisk and matter-of-fact greeting. "And is Jean here too?" Mrs. Byrd had quite the air of taking Dick, and the situation in which she found him, entirely for granted.

To get Jean out of the crypt took some time on account of her wrist, but the American woman

surveyed the field and directed the operation as though she had been accustomed to such accidents all her life. First, she called down consolingly to that miserable heap of a girl, dirty, dishevelled and in pain, who crouched there under the welcome light. "You're all right, Jeanie, my lamb! Just wait a minute or two and we'll be having you out in a jiffy. Be patient a minute. We've got to get this dead man out of the way first!"

Long afterwards, Dick was moved to laughter when he considered in what a comfortable, maternal sort of voice and cool, authoritative manner, Mrs. Byrd of Chicago dealt with these little matters of danger and rescue and death. One could imagine the slow, muddling way in which the scared old Gapper and the helpless Thomas would have managed the affair without her! As it was, she took charge of them with the quietly steady and repeated directions which they best understood.

"Hold the light down, my man—what are you gibbering for? The creature, whoever he is, is past hurting you, you know!"

"Whatever'll her ladyship say?" Gapper was muttering. "Whatever'll she be doing, Thomas, now—there'll be trouble now, mark'ee!"

"There's likely to be lots more trouble for everybody if you leave a dead man lying here any longer," Mrs. Byrd rather grimly assured them. "Turn him over now.... Ah, that's it!"

She plumped down on her knees before the fallen body and set her light full upon the face



It seemed to Dick that she studied it a very long moment, so that his own gaze vividly retained the picture of a slight, common, pinch-faced man, with eyes in the top of his head, thin, over-jointed fingers and a blue-black chin. He had been shot in the side.....

"Yes: he's been dead several hours," Dick heard Mrs. Byrd say; and then she got up quickly again. She was amazingly active and brisk in all her movements; and called through the trap in her pleasant, steady voice:

"Now Jeanie, my lamb, look out! We're coming down for you!"

## CHAPTER XIV, THE GARLANDED STAIRCASE

THREE flights of twisting black oak staircase with uneven treads, and two long, dark passages led to Miss Lang's room. Up these Lady Monkton wearily climbed, the day after her return home. She had re-entered Shank as a queen makes progress through a domain rescued, and with rather a royal air of reserved displeasure. Lady Monkton had made it very plain that she considered what had happened due to somebody's carelessness and neglect. There had been long and trying interviews with the local police; short, but pithy interviews with Gapper and Dolly, with Laking and Hays, with Fencotes and Thomas, with the steward, the gardener, the forester and the lodge-keeper. There had been enquiries by telegraph from the Society of Antiquaries, from the Armourer at Windsor Castle, from the Librarian of the Bodleian and from the Directors of the British Museum, to all of whom re-assuring answers had been despatched, stating that nothing was missing from the collections.



No word had come, none at all, from Charles Ventris, and Lady Monkton supposed that news of the attempted burglary had not yet reached him. He was probably motoring in the Italian hills, she thought, and under the circumstances she much hoped it might not reach him, at least until the Coroner's inquest and the worst of the excitement was over.

From top to bottom, the stair-rail was entwined with a heavy garland of carved fruits and flowers, which lent it an air of permanent festival. Denise Monkton had never failed to look with delight upon its luxuriance of fancy and perfection of craftsmanship, but today, when her hand was impeded by the sharp points of the carving, she felt annoyance. It all seemed of a piece; there was a prick lying under the garland of this beauty, a futility, a weariness in the charge of these possessions, which gave her a sudden longing to lay it down and rest.... This mood was followed by a reactionary sense of her own disloyalty. She straightened, and the flame relit in her narrow eyes.....

This American boy, (for so she still instinctively named him) was Charles quite right about him?—right, in counting so utterly upon his loyalty to them and to Shank? When he had told her the story of his adventure the night of her return, Denise Monkton had been conscious of surprise at his way of telling it—conscious that there were things about him she hadn't at all realized. In the first place, he had acted with quickness and independence: he had had ap-

parently no difficulty in deciding what to do, and he had accepted, she thought, rather lightly, the responsibility of burglar-hunting on his own account. Up to that talk, Denise had thought him rather silent, a little bewildered, a little unsure—which fell in with her own mood of unsureness. Now all was changed and she even resented the firmness of this stranger in the rôle of guardian, where she herself had never felt firmness!.....

“But why on earth didn’t you call someone to go with you?” she asked him incredulously; and he had answered, standing tall and handsome on the hearth-rug:

“I didn’t want anyone. I wanted the fun to myself.”

“Oh, if you regard it as fun—!”

Dick felt her vexation. “Not the danger to Shank—but then I was sure of preventing *that*.”

Again she was aware of having met the unexpected. “But I can’t see *why* you should be so sure—!”

“Well, I was. There was Miss Lang, you know.”

“Miss Lang is only a girl, besides—”

“Miss Lang is worth twenty of Hays and Gapper, Lady Monkton, believe me.”

His calm accent in this statement jarred her; also the fact that he seemed wholly to have forgotten how she had asked him, caressingly, to call her “Denise”.....

Well, she could only hope that Charles was right about him; but a shadow of doubt lay still across her mind as she ascended the stair.....



The room she sought was pleasant, with old-fashioned furniture and faded chintzes. A bunch of flowers stood on the dressing-table and the fireplace had been filled with a blossoming bough. Soft day came in at the casement. Jean Lang lay in bed, where the doctor kept her; for she had been a good deal upset by her adventure. Her bandaged wrist lay outside the coverlet, with a thick, dark plait lying beside it. Her employer had always thought her plain, with capable, irregular features that showed more character than beauty, but she now came forward to the bedside with another impression. This business-like secretary was just an appealing young girl, with a white skin, black hair and clear eyes. The discovery was not agreeable to Lady Monkton; but for the time being it remained below the active surface of her mind.

There was much to hear. With her chair drawn to the bedside, the mistress of Shank listened in her passive, watchful manner to Jean's story, from the moment Dolly reported the tourist missing, to the moment many hours later when Miss Lang was lifted out of the crypt by the American lady, to find the supposed burglar lying dead beside the open trap-door.

"They had to take me upstairs first and put me to bed....I was worn out....not so much from the fall and the sprain, but from that horrible time of wondering who was shut up there in the dark with me....and what would happen! After that, I believe, Mrs. Byrd sent for the police."

Lady Monkton heard all this with a close attention. Then she interrupted....“But this lady?....how came she there? I don’t seem to understand—?”

“She had gone over the rooms once accompanied by the man who was killed,” Jean explained, “apparently, as she told me yesterday, it was by chance largely that she met and talked with him....But I thought she might know who he was and so I tried to ask her by telephone... Unfortunately, she was out....and when she returned, they could not find me. That alarmed her, it seems, so she came herself to the house and insisted that Gapper and Thomas go over the place with her. So they found us.”

“She seems to have had a curiously accurate knowledge of Shank,” Lady Monkton meditatively commented.

“She has been sketching it, you know. And she studied architecture in America, she told me.”

“Still, I think it odd,” said Lady Monkton; and as Jean Lang herself thought it odd, although sure, from some loyal instinct, that all was right, she remained silent.

“That little stair behind the Rubens has been shut off for years,” Lady Monkton told her. “As you saw, it belonged originally to the Abbots’ House. The Jacobean building began just there. It leads down to the brew-house, to the monks’ shops, to all that old rookery of passages lying under the ecclesiastical part of the building. There is a way out by a passage under the chapel into the crypt—but not where you fell.”



"You think they opened that trap-door by mistake?" Jean asked, fascinated.

"I don't know," the other answered, still pursuing her thoughts. "Sir Piers and I locked that door leading to the stairs ten or twelve years ago, when the cartoon in the gallery was re-hung. I did not suppose that anyone knew of its existence, and yet I find that the lock has been oiled and shows signs of use. Moreover, a simple lever has been attached to the picture so that it could be moved from the wall at will. That is what worries me—it looks like a plot, like a carefully planned scheme to loot the place."

"But all is right, now you've discovered it in time."

"I am not so certain."

The secretary sat up eagerly in bed to reassure her and spoke with animation:

"But think, my lady! Evidently, the men had quarrelled and one shot the other.... The shot was fired just as Mr. Monkton reached them. He was running with the torch in his hand—and I followed. He was simply splendid—then and afterwards.... If he hadn't been so energetic and cheerful, we'd have been down there still!"

"To me, he appears rather rash." Lady Monkton spoke coldly and lisped a little. This warm accent of praise was distasteful to her, but she did not show it.

"You had a horrid experience," she observed rising, and her tone was more kindly, "and you must stay where you are till you feel quite yourself, Miss Lang. I've had a thorough search

made through all the old part of the house. It's very disagreeable, but there must be an inquest and I'm afraid you'll have to testify—?"

"Oh I'm much better. I'll be up tomorrow," Jean protested. "And though I'm sorry, my lady, you should have found this so upsetting, at least no harm was done—nothing was missing or injured?"

"Nothing at all—and of course, my dear, I want you to realize that I appreciate your devotion to Shank. Your promptness probably prevented some irreparable damage to the collections." Her tone had warmth at which the other flushed.

"We—Mr. Monkton and I—did the best we could," the secretary replied, and again the easy coupling of the names caused Lady Monkton distaste.

"I knew I could count on you," she returned silkily, as she dropped the girl's hand and moved toward the door. There she paused, continuing to speak in her peculiar lisping voice, with eyes which were no longer half-closed, but open and purposeful.

"By the way, you've always been discretion itself, but you may not realize how very differently Mr. Richard Monkton has been brought up in the States....where I understand they lack our distinctions....Of course, you've heard the rumors concerning him? I may as well tell you that the evidence is very strong—Mr. Ventris is quite, quite sure that the young man is....Under the circumstances—for your own sake chief-



ly—you had better discourage any attempts he may make at acquaintance. They would be natural in his own country, but *here*, I think, it would be disadvantageous and cause you embarrassment."

"Quite so, my lady: thank you," the secretary made answer, as if she had been taught a formula, as no doubt she had. But when the door was shut and her ladyship's languid foot-fall had died out along the corridor, this formula was of no more support to Jean than formulæ generally are. She turned her face aside into her pillow and shed a few slow tears upon the long plait; although just why she felt so humiliated, Jean could hardly have told.

When, however, later in the day, her friend Mrs. Byrd climbed the long flights to visit her, no sign remained of any tears in her eyes; their smile was gay. Mrs. Byrd paused at the doorway to smile back. She was fashionably dressed, with a suitable middle-aged elegance—her hat was exactly right, the embroidered lawn at her throat and wrists was fastened with a diamond bar, her shoes were to Miss Lang a sheer revelation of neatness. Mrs. Byrd herself, as she looked at the cambric-clad invalid and the few and simple personal belongings scattered about the room, was conscious of pity. Loving as she did everything fine and delicate and becoming, she held an inward image of what Miss Lang would have looked like if she had bought her clothes in the States.

"'Tisn't as if she lacked taste," the American

indignantly reflected. "She looks a lady to her finger-tips and her ribbons always match. And I've never once seen her yield to the temptation of the Englishwoman when in doubt, to add a third color—purple for choice!....No: it's just that the money has to go home, I guess....and what can the poor lamb do on £4 a week?"

Outwardly, Mrs. Byrd showed no interest in dress. She talked about Jean's experience; and the excitement which it had caused in Shankmere; and what everybody said.

"They expect me to testify at the inquest day after tomorrow....though it's little I know to help them. My meeting with the man was accidental....Yes: I'd met him once before—at Dulacq's the great art dealers on Fifth Avenue—you know?"

Jean nodded vigorously: "Rather! They send us a letter regularly every quarter, offering to buy anything in the house!"

"I guess they're greedy, all right. They look at Shank with hungry eyes. Well—that fellow did work for them—nothing wrong in *that*.... He spoke to me in the village once or twice.... I never forget a face. We went through the rooms in the same party once....I saw nothing shady about him."

"Nor I."

"Who shot him and how did the murderer get out?—that's what we all want to know. Did you see anything, Jean?"

Jean stirred restlessly at the recollection, for Mrs. Byrd's gaze was anxiously fixed on her face.



"Nothing to count. It was all so confused and the fight was going on at the end of the passage where it was black as pitch. I was trying to catch up with Mr. Monkton—neither of us saw that open trap-door. I screamed when I fell..."

Mrs. Byrd considered this information, but did not seem satisfied.

"You must have been very close to the two men. Even in the dark and with the excitement—there were clues, you know. There's touch,—like the feel of a coat sleeve—the sound of breathing—or smell—"

She paused, because a certain horror had come into the girl's face and looked out of her eyes. Jean simply shook her head.....

"I guess I'll be moving on after the inquest," the elder lady resumed with a brisk change of subject and tone. "After all, I came into the country to rest. These beautiful old places seem to be peaceful only on the outside. I didn't bargain for a murder and a Coroner's inquest—*not* exactly! That gun that scared you so, my lamb—came in pretty handy now—didn't it?"

Jean laughed and agreed. "And yet," said she, "it was an odd thing to fall out of a lady's color-box!"

"So the vicar said. I'd a long sermon from him on the subject," said Mrs. Byrd; "firstly, secondly, and thirdly—made me feel quite at home, as if I was in the old wooden Congregational Church, where I used to be taken as a child. It was all to the effect that ladies didn't

carry guns in England—that it wasn't done. He intimated 'twas unnecessary as well as inelegant. I told him I'd carried mine all through the wild west and never came so near to needing it as I did that evening. I told him I guessed that, since the War, England would be the better for some kind of a Vigilante Committee. Things seemed sort of slack."

"He must have loved that!"

"He did. Oh, he kept polite in that haw-haw way of his—but it hurt his feelings, and I'm going to move on." She bent toward Jean and spoke more gravely, "I'm going to leave you my address, my lamb," said she. "Things may get mixed up, and if they do and you need help, why just don't say beans to anybody, but come straight along to me. I'm a funny person about happening to be 'round in the nick of time."

"You certainly are," was Jean's warm and grateful response; "but surely the trouble is over now. The inquest will tell us everything we want to know about that wretched burglar—and then everything will settle down and go on as it did before."

Mrs. Byrd arose, picked up her graceful wrap and settled it over her shoulders. Her manner and speech were as direct and straightforward as they usually were, with an additional emphasis of seriousness. "Between you and me, I don't expect things will go on as they did before," she observed. "I've looked around since I've been in this neighborhood and I'm like Biddy, your old nurse; I don't think Shank's a healthy



place of residence....Oh, yes, I know! They put in drains and electric light during the fourteenth century, but there's a lack of moral drainage and moral electric lighting there at the present. Too many trap-doors into the cellar, in my opinion."

A faint color touched the girl's cheeks, and her frank eyes fell.

"Moreover," Mrs. Byrd pursued as she moved toward the door, "there won't be much to learn from the Coroner's inquest, not while it takes place just where the gates of Shank open into the village. I know what you will say. England rouses, of course, every once in awhile and paws the air and gets mad and makes a big fuss; but not over a solitary and friendless burglar.... if he was a burglar....No, my lamb; the inquest will not tell us what we want to know—at least, not *this* inquest!"

With which cheerful prophecy, she took her departure.

## CHAPTER XIV

### TESTIMONY TO THE CHARACTER OF PAUL STERN, DECEASED

**M**RS. Byrd's prediction was fulfilled. Very little that was not known already, came out at the inquest, and to what did come out she was herself the chief contributor.

The inquest took place in what had been the old refectory, a large room with a trestle-table, which had been furnished for the occasion. Access to this room was to be had from the quadrangle, so that the persons concerned might go in and out without enroaching on the privacy of the family. Every care, in fact, was taken that they should not do so, and Fencotes had stationed an under-gardener at the house entrance to turn back any person who showed signs of straying in that direction. Dick saw this decorous congregation making its way across the court, men and some women, evidently citizens of Shankmere, and all bearing themselves with a befitting gravity. Strangers could be marked by the curiosity they showed in their surroundings....He saw the doctor, in close talk with



the Coroner; members of the local police; Mrs. Byrd, very much to be picked out from the crowd by the finish and elegance of her dress; Jean Lang with her wrist still in a sling.... All these persons and some others walked across to the door of the refectory and Dick followed them at a little distance and placed himself in a corner of the room. The proceedings, quite apart from the mystery with which they were concerned, struck him as characteristic.

The Coroner was a pursy man, whose horizon had been all his life dominated by the Great House, standing on its hill above the town. If it was true that modern movement had deprived that Great House of its ancient feudal power and influence, yet this had been largely counteracted, so far as the village was concerned, by the heightened power gained through the reputation of Shank as a museum and art gallery. Shankmere had no industries of its own; but under the wing of this reputation, there had sprung up a certain activity for its inhabitants. Shops of so-called antiques flourished in the village: artists, at certain seasons of the year, filled the inns and cottages, and thus the business life of the community had come to centre in its chief ornament.... To the English present at the inquest, nothing was more natural and inevitable than the Coroner's attitude, who seemed more struck by the impertinence of an intruder's getting himself killed in the very bowels of Shank, than by the mystery of who had killed him. This insult to the Great House affected the Jury

also, all typical citizens of the place. They talked in undertones about the present era of after-war violence, intimating that the person to blame for the incident was probably Mr. Lloyd-George. Mrs. Byrd found all this interesting, very interesting indeed: to Dick Monkton it was astounding and amusing.

The doctor, who had been summoned to examine the body, was the first to give his evidence. He stated that death had been caused by a revolver-bullet fired at close range and had evidently occurred about five hours before. The clothing showed there had been a struggle, but search could reveal no trace of a weapon, which the murderer must have retained. The police had made an exhaustive examination of all the lower storeys of Shank, the chapel, crypts and cellars, but could find nothing out of order, nor any trace of the means by which the murderer had entered or escaped. Stone floors revealed no footprints; nothing in the rooms or galleries was missing, or even disturbed. About a yard from the open trap-door, a piece of worn and dirty parchment had been picked up. Faint traces of lettering had been found on it, but no tests revealed anything of importance. The Coroner pointed out that there was no reason to suppose it had been brought there recently: it might have been lying there for fifty years. That portion of the old ecclesiastical building was seldom entered by any of the staff at Shank. At this point a romantic Juror interrupted to suggest that the parchment probably contained a cryptogram, lo-



cating a hoard of treasure, which doubtless accounted for the affair. This caused an audible smile to go about the crowded room and many persons felt themselves in sympathy with the Juror, and regretful when the Coroner nipped this engaging theory in the bud. The sheet of parchment bore no cryptogram, nor any secret writing and the Coroner did not fail to add, a trifle dryly, that there was treasure enough at Shank in the open to account for any attempt at robbery. . . . .

Facts about the dead man had been easily obtained, from the harmless contents of his own pockets and through the American Consul. Much to the surprise of the police, these facts were negative; for he had no criminal record. His name was Paul Stern and he had no known alias. His age was stated to be thirty-eight. He had landed in New York in 1904, a French citizen: and in 1912 he became a naturalized American. For nearly ten years he had been employed by the firm of A. Dulacq Frères, the great picture and curio dealers, as a skilled cleaner and restorer of fine paintings. His record with them had been excellent and he left them at the outbreak of war, ostensibly to join up in his native land. In 1918, he was apparently in Washington for a time, though in what capacity was by no means clear. For a few months of 1919, Stern had returned to Dulacq's in prosperous circumstances and had filled the place of an ill employee; after which they had lost sight of him. A long cablegram from the head of the New York firm assured the

Consul in the most positive manner of the good character which Paul Stern had borne while in their employ and of the respect which all there had felt for him. To whatever the circumstances surrounding his mysterious death might point, the firm of Dulacq personally could not believe that Paul Stern was or had ever been a thief . . . From the American Consul in London it was learned that Stern had arrived in France during March; that his papers were in order; that he had appeared in England some weeks later and had conducted himself as a quiet and orderly sight-seer. He had registered at the Commercial Hotel at Shankmere some weeks previous to his death and had given himself out as an artist, visiting the places and parks in the neighborhood, where he generally carried a sketch-book. His accent was foreign; his ways tranquil; his payments extremely regular. Whoever would have thought, said the landlord pathetically, that such a quiet-like chap would come to such a h'awful end?

Mrs. Byrd was then called upon to tell what she knew. She gave her evidence in a clear and orderly manner, stating that her name was Georgiana Henderson Byrd, widow, of Chicago, Illinois, travelling in Great Britain for pleasure. She had encountered Paul Stern and had recognized him as an employee of Dulacq's, who had been asked to give his opinion on the genuineness of a picture she was selling to them in 1919. He had been sent for to explain the condition of the painting to her, and she had been struck by



his unusual intelligence. She had wondered at the time, she added, to find a man of high abilities and good presence in a subordinate position. At Shankmere she had encountered Stern first in the street. When they chanced to meet and go over Shank together, she had led him to talk of the pictures they saw and over which he was enthusiastic. There her knowledge of him ended, and the face of the dead man when she beheld it, had been a painful surprise. The rest of Mrs. Byrd's testimony merely concerned Miss Lang's telephone call to her, and her sudden alarm when, on hastening to reply to it, she heard that Miss Lang was missing. When asked why she had taken upon herself, personally, to make the search, she caused a smile by saying that she guessed they were like that where she was brought up—they didn't believe in putting off a rescue till it was too late to do anything but 'phone the undertaker. Besides she had a hunch that something was wrong somewhere in that museum.....

"Mr. Richard Monkton!"

The name caused a little breeze to go around the room; necks were craned to see the Claimant, of whom everyone had heard so much. Respect, however, for the family, did not permit the Coroner to ask the young man any questions, apart from those necessary to establish his identity. He answered them in a brief and reticent manner.

"You are Mr. Richard Monkton, late of Philadelphia in the United States?"

"I am."

“Are you the present Claimant to the Monkton estate?”

“Yes.”

“Please tell the Jury what you know about the matter under discussion.”

Dick narrated his adventure fully and frankly. The audience thought him decidedly handsome, if a trifle thin and pale, and listened to him attentively, although some people had the same difficulty as in the case of the previous witness, in following his transatlantic accent and locutions. Additional importance was attached to his testimony, since he was the only person to see the dead man in life just before the conflict; if indeed it were the dead man he had seen on the stairs behind the Rubens Gallery. He had also witnessed the actual struggle, though in the darkness he had made out little; all was vague, confused and furious; a fight, a shot, a fall. He did not own a revolver himself: if he had he would not have taken the poker which was found in the crypt beside him.

Miss Lang, the secretary, followed this witness and supported his statements in every particular. She had applied to him in Lady Monkton's absence, she said, because he was a member of the family. Her own arrival on the scene of the murder was just as Mr. Monkton's torch went out. She therefore saw little but she definitely heard the shot, a few seconds before she fell through the trap. For a long while, in the darkness of the crypt, she did not know what manner of man was there imprisoned with her. A movement of sym-



pathy and horror was excited by this picture, and even the Coroner was impressed. Jean Lang, moreover, was very well known in the village, and the room was filled with her friends. Before dismissing her, the Coroner and the Jury asked her a number of questions relating to the collections.

"Have attempts on Shank been made before?" she was asked.

"Not since I have been at work here," was the answer. "There was more than one, I believe, during Sir Piers' life-time."

"Was Lady Monkton apprehensive of such attempts?"

"Lady Monkton has always been anxious. So has Mr. Ventris. Since the War especially."

"Prices have risen for such things since the War; have they not?"

"Enormously. South America and the States have been eager buyers."

"What is the value of the collections?"

This question was asked by a Juror who kept the best antique shop in the town, and who evidently longed to raise a vision of opulence by the reply. He looked about on his fellow Jurors importantly.

"That," the witness said in her clear voice, "would be hard to answer. They are extremely valuable, but the value is doubtless heightened by their setting. Scattered, some of the items would decline in importance, which makes it difficult to name a total."

"Still, there are well-known pictures and so forth?"

“Oh yes, of course. The Manuscript Collection is the finest in Europe. The ‘Great Hoppner’ has been valued at £50,000: two of the Reynolds at £30,000 each, and there are several other paintings, among them a Leonardo—which are unique. Besides, we have three chef d’œuvres of Cellini which are almost priceless.”

The Juror who had asked the question was gratified by the stir of interest which these sums aroused.

“I take it,” the foreman asked Jean, “you will be having many offers from collectors in foreign parts?”

“Such offers come every week,” the witness told him; “I had almost said every day.”

Some time was then taken up in a discussion of the existing evidence concerning the way in which the murderer had escaped. Old plans and maps were produced, and the Superintendent of Police tried to make them clear to the Jury with the assistance of a stumpy pencil and a heavy thumb. That part of Shank in which the crime had occurred being of old stone, defied attempts to trace the passage of any person through it. There were no foot-prints anywhere, nor fingerprints; nothing had been dropped. So long had it been since anyone in the house had gone there, that nobody could say whether the trap-door through which Dick and Jean had fallen had been recently opened, or had stood open for a century. All other doors and windows were exactly as they had been; and they furnished more than one way of escape for a person with knowledge. The com-



plete lack of evidence was the remarkable feature of the case.

The testimony of Gapper, Dolly and Thomas brought out nothing new and closed the proceedings. Dolly was positive in her identification of the dead man, as the same who had gone over the house several times before. Until he disappeared therein, she noticed nothing out of the way in his behavior.

Never had there been a case in his experience, the Coroner observed, where there was so little to go upon. And while the unfortunate man had borne a good character and had come to an end regrettably mysterious, yet there was no blinking the fact that his death occurred in a spot where he had no business to be. One could only leave the mystery to that Higher Power from Whom nothing was hid. In rendering thanks to this Higher Power, the Coroner did not openly say he thought him careless, since if mysterious, much about the affair had been arranged by Providence to spare Lady Monkton further inconvenience; but that was what he meant. The usual verdict on such occasions was brought in; and the gathering was allowed to disperse.

The inquest left Dick curiously uneasy. There had not been a shadow of doubt in his mind that the dead man would be found to have a criminal record, because such a job as robbing Shank was not likely to be attempted by an amateur. Yet the proceedings had thrown into relief the fact that no actual evidence of attempted robbery existed, other than the unknown's presence where

he should not have been. Stern had been alone in the museum rooms for more than an hour before their glimpse of him—yet nothing among all the treasures in these rooms showed sign of disturbance. What if the reason back of Stern's action were not robbery at all? Plainly, to Dick's mind, came the idea that, if robbery were intended, it was robbery in the future.....

The slow English summer had fully unfolded her multi-colored wings under an exquisite sky. For the first time since his coming into the country, the young man felt a stirring toward the outside, a desire to get beyond the stately gardens and out of the dominating shadow cast by the towers of the Great House. He set forth briskly, first across the Park and paddock; then out along the yellow high road. As he went, swinging ahead at a good pace and with a pleasant sense of recovered strength. Dick's mind occupied itself with equal vigor, moving along the tortuous pathway of these problems.....

Suppose the visit of Stern to the recesses of the old building had been one of reconnaissance merely? To Dick's mind, the incident seemed to wear this aspect far more naturally than the first construction they had placed upon it. But in that event the danger was by no means over: and a very disagreeable and alarming suggestion was at once introduced. No clue of any kind existed to the personality of the second man, the one who was probably, if not certainly, responsible for Stern's death. Such a plot as Dick suspected would undoubtedly require an accomplice



within the house. M. Charles's last words to him came to his mind: "It's not from *without* that danger will come."

Those dozens of servants—he did not yet know all their names! Why did they need so many? In his naïf Americanism he decided that it would work so much better if they had half the number, paid them twice the amount of wages and made them work a great deal harder! He did not realize that he was here facing the last barrier of feudal tradition—the one that nobody had been ever able to change. Here and there in that complicated hierarchy, men and women were still to be found with the soul of the true retainer—faithful, honorable, self-respecting and devoted to a chief. But the majority, especially since the War, had all the feudal vices and none of the feudal virtues. They saw the ruling class in decadence and waited with a patient hostility to take advantage of their fall. They were more than ever the vulture class.

Shank had never been fortunate in its staff. Jean Lang had once told Dick this, adding that it was because the masters of Shank were more interested in things than in people. Shank in the past had been indifferent to its tenants and dependents, and now these were more than indifferent to Shank. Lady Monkton had been obliged to go outside her own people for maids and footmen: she was unpopular: "'Er ladyship don't 'eed." She was a stranger, and Charles Ventris was a stranger, and neither of them were understood.....

Dick felt he did not like the servants with whom he came into contact; something in their manner seemed wrong to him somehow. Already he had been openly ogled by an under-housemaid, much to his discomfort. The butler Hays struck him as secretive and probably profligate; Fencotes, the head gardener, was surly, Thomas treated one with a half-insolent servility; there was a smooth-faced, evil-eyed foreign maid of Lady Monkton's, whom one encountered in the passages....Dolly was a decent, respectable, modest girl: Gapper was just an old fool. In the interior of the Great House there were others, many others, who stared at him or scurried away at his appearance—surely, there was every chance among such a crew for treachery from within!

Occupied with these thoughts and conclusions, and with a heavy sense of responsibility darkening his mood, Dick had walked for more than an hour when he reached a scattered group of houses, the little village of Endwise. Here, feeling thirsty, he paused for a moment, and stepped into the commercial room of the Spotted Doe. While he drank his beer, he looked around him.....

The place was old-fashioned and shabby, but clean and somehow comfortable. Level sunshine came pleasantly in and lit up the posters of Johnnie Walker and the Putney Pet. A bustling bar-maid wiped glasses behind the counter: a stoutish man, with heavy cheeks and small eyes, gave the visitor greeting with some



official remarks about the weather. The old grey cat, curled up in the window-seat; slept in the sunshine. Only two other guests were present; a small person, neatly dressed, with a green bag, suggestive of employment in one of the minor branches of the law, and a good-looking, big man of middle years, with heavy moustache, gaiters and a thick stick, who like Dick, was apparently resting after a country walk. He stuck out his long legs in front of him and retired behind a newspaper, turning its pages so that the young man could not see, save in glimpses, the face behind them. Meanwhile, the landlord and the man who looked like a solicitor's clerk were occupied in friendly interchange:

"They held an inquest at Shank this morning, didn't they?" the former was asking, and Dick, not unwillingly, listened for the answer.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE PRINCESS'S NUT

“**A**Y—they did,” drawled the other. I stopped in for a bit myself. ’Twere a good crowd-like.”

“Did you now? And did you hear aught?” enquired the landlord of the Spotted Doe.

“Not much come out but what was in the papers,” the other assured him; “seems the dead man was some sort of foreigner—had no business in Shank House, so they said. But none knows who killed him and none’s like to know, I’m thinking.”

“Odd doings at the Great House,” the innkeeper commented, leaning his elbows on the counter and shaking his head. “Quite a bit of talk through the countryside, now and again.”

“What sort of talk?” This question was asked with no more than civil curiosity, but the landlord of the Spotted Doe once again slowly shook his head.

“I dunno—just talk,” was all he vouchsafed in answer and busied himself in straightening a row of glasses. The solicitor’s clerk, wise in the hab-



its of his country-folk, allowed the pause to lengthen while he smoked on placidly. The big man sitting in a corner turned the page of his newspaper. Imagination might have filled the silence with the slow rotation of the landlord's thoughts, bringing them round inevitably to the point of speech.

"I've some of 'em dropping in from the Great House most evenings," he began again with a touch of pride: "The steward and Mr. Fencotes and sometimes Mr. Hays, the butler. They go where they're treated right—they do! Come to think, Mary,"—he turned to his assistant who was finishing up the tumblers—"it were Mr. Hays and no other stopped in here the evening of the murder, weren't it? He had a friend with him—soft-spoken chap with a stiff neck and head on one side. What was his name now?"

"Coles," said the bar-maid shortly.

"That's it—Mr. Coles," the landlord continued. "They had a glass or two, and a pipe. Stayed quite awhile, they did. Her ladyship was in London."

"Stayed till Mr. Hays was rung up from the Great House 'count of their finding that chap dead in the cellar," the barmaid asserted, quite aware of the dramatic value of her announcement. "It did give Mr. Hays a turn, that it did."

"And well it might!" her employer solemnly supplemented. The solicitor's clerk agreed that it might well indeed have given the butler a turn—such news as that coming all of a sudden-like! and then the barmaid carried her laden tray of

glassware out of the room. But conversation between the two men was not interrupted by her departure.

"Queer doings at Shank—ever since Sir Piers came in. He brought strangers with him and strange ways, and things have never been what you call quiet-like since. . . . . There's this claimant now, Sir Piers' son, what they say the little lady didn't drown—nobody knows the rights of it."

"I don't deny we've heard the same down our way," the clerk agreed, interested.

"Just one thing after t'other at Shank," the landlord ruminated; "for better than thirty years nothing but upsets. . . . . That Welshman Sir Piers brought, he would be finding things, old books and such, hidden away in the Abbot's House. They sold things and they bought things—they were everlastingly at it. . . . Then her poor ladyship's end; (and they *do* say she had cause, if all were known!) and now a Claimant and a murder, and the Lord knows what! There were a chap in here, long of yesterday," said the speaker warming to his theme, "what said they ought to change the old motto: said it ought to be, 'Shank smells rank,' so he did!"

This specimen of local wit caused a slow rumble of laughter in the teller; but the solicitor's clerk was by way of being a philosopher. "Oh well, 'tis so everywhere," he commented; "changes since the War, and in these big folks, particular changes. They ain't got the hold they had, nor yet the power—they've been hit—that's



what they've been. I take it the goings on at Shank are the same in other big places all over the country."

The landlord dissented from this easy view and declared that the state of affairs was peculiar to Shank. "Wherever they've let in foreigners 'twill happen," was his final opinion. At this point, Dick, having finished his drink, and having really no excuse to linger, got up, paid his score and left the room. The big man with the moustache waited until young Monkton had gone, then he too rose and followed.

He was one of those heavy, large-framed men who can astonish the observer by putting on at will a high degree of speed. When this stranger emerged into the road, young Monkton was nearly out of sight; yet he was not breathing any the faster when he finally came up with Dick and addressed him by name.

"Mr. Monkton," said he, "may I have a word with you?"

Richard wheeled. His thoughts since leaving the bar-parlor had been uneasy ones and he glanced at the stranger with a touch of this same uneasiness.

"Do I know you?" he asked, "I don't seem to remember—"

The big man touched his forehead in explanation. "I saw you at the inquest. You have the Monkton brows," he admitted. "I won't keep you; I'll just walk beside you, if I may."

He had a quiet way of speaking, a rather slow and very sensible manner, and the appearance of

a man of business. His non-committal face was typical of his class. His eyes were remarkably steady. There was nothing offensive in the request or in the way it was made; nor could Dick object when the other fell into step beside him. They walked on together some paces in silence.

"I take it you heard our friend—the landlord—a few minutes back?" the stranger began, switching the grass at the roadside with his stick. "So did I, of course. What did you think of it?"

"I don't know," Dick confessed, "that I thought anything much. I've not been very long in England. But may I ask who—?"

"—I am? There's no secret about that," said the elder. He took a card from his wallet and handed it to his companion. The name upon it was that of Peter Godston, Criminal Investigation Department, New Scotland Yard, Whitehall. "I came down from London yesterday," he continued, "and attended this inquest, where I heard you testify.....Then I took a walk about, to hear what people thought. 'Tis an odd business, Mr. Monkton. The local police don't seem to get very far in it. It has certain features—but no doubt they have already occurred to you? I see they have."

Evidently he was a much quicker mind than appeared, and Dick therefore, merely nodded. "I told all I know at the inquest, if that's what you want," he said. "I kept nothing back which could help the police."

"No: I don't think you kept anything back," the other agreed. "It wasn't *that*....I wanted



really to know if you got the same sort of impression as I did.....Now you heard those two men—they're not the only ones. I've stopped in at half a dozen places in and around Shankmere and the talk is all the same. There's no respect for the Great House down here; there seems a feeling that something's wrong..... How do you account for it?"

The question was not an easy one to answer but it was asked in such a straightforward manner and in such good faith, that it roused no opposition in Dick.

"I don't know," he replied, as frankly. "I've been in England only a month or two and I've heard few people talk. Don't they all gossip about these old houses and families? Does it mean anything more than that?"

"Not quite in the same way.....The great families still have their place, despite all the talk about democracy, Mr. Monkton. They're firmly entrenched, as you'll find out if you really *are* Monkton of Shank. My experience is that in places like this, there's a deal of loyalty left to the big house and to the family that owns it. But there's not a bit at Shankmere, apparently.....And it's true that a series of odd happenings have set folks agog."

"But some of them were twenty years ago!"

"Twenty years is nothing in the countryside....."

"Have you talked to Lady Monkton?"

The big man waited a few minutes before answering this question. "Not yet," he ad-

mitted in his manner of slow frankness. "There's work to be done first, and besides—I fear her ladyship may resent the line of enquiry. But I'd be grateful if you'd give me your impressions—in confidence of course."

"If mine are of any use—but I'm after all an outsider as yet."

"That's why they'll be valuable."

Dick hesitated, uncomfortably. "I suppose," he said, "that some of it springs from the fact that Lady Monkton and Sir Piers' agent, Mr. Ventris, are so wrapped up in the collections that they don't pay much attention to the village. No doubt the village doesn't like it."

"I hear that the servants are rather a shifty lot. You agree, don't you?" and again Dick had the feeling that this big man was quick in drawing an inference from another's expression. "Where could one get hold of Mr. Ventris? He's away, I hear."

"I can't tell you that. He's motoring, and Lady Monkton thinks he must have missed the news so far. He's in Italy."

"Quite so—thanks. I'd like a talk with him. So you think that the collections take Lady Monkton's mind off the things such ladies usually bother about? Does she worry over them?"

"She is nervous about their safety, certainly."

"Yet she fills the place with the scum of employment offices! That butler of hers, Hays,—he was at the inquest, standing near me at the back. I'd a word with him—and he struck me as a queer 'un."



Dick felt that the term covered much, nor could he deny that his own impressions were not very different; but he was chiefly occupied in wondering what the big Mr. Godston's purpose was in telling him so many of his views. Dick had always supposed that the police wanted *you* to tell *them* things, yet this person seemed rather simply communicative. They walked on together side by side in silence for a few moments and the Scotland Yard man did not break it until the limits of the Monkton property had been reached. A footpath crossed the Park here, making a short cut to the house, and therefore the stranger came to a stand.....

"Well, good-bye to you, Mr. Monkton, and many thanks," he said, still in that direct, rather obvious manner which had somewhat puzzled his companion, bespeaking, as it did, some previous knowledge or acquaintance. "Better keep that card of mine—y'may find you hear something and it'd turn out useful. I'm always at your service, if you want me."

Dick thanked him, bade him farewell, and started home alone on the footpath, on which however, he had hardly made three strides before he heard the other's voice call to him. At once he turned his head.

"I just wanted to say—that I hope things will turn out in your favor in due time," said Mr. Peter Godston, quite without any smile, and in fact with a shade of expression in his rosy, broad face which Dick could not readily define. "I mean about the succession, you know!"

"Oh,—*that!*" said young Monkton, coloring a little. "That's all so new to me that I've not dared to hope it's all true—as Mr. Ventriss and the lawyers say it is."

"No doubt—stranger things have happened, Mr. Monkton, than a woman's drawing back at the last minute from drowning her child!"

Dick again winced at that reference—hating it as he had done from the first, but he felt the kindly intention and turned off his wince with some half-joke about his being a Yankee—and too many of them in England already:

"Seems to me we're over the whole island, and now another at Shank—pretty hard on the Great House!" he said with a genuine, if boyish embarrassment.

"Oh, well—they're better than the Germans, if you come to that," Godston responded to Dick's surprise; "and as to Shank," the man added dryly, "I think 'twould be a bit healthier for a change!"

As he crossed the Park under the oaks, Dick reflected that this remark had distinctly conveyed an impression less complimentary to himself than unflattering to his hostess. On her account he felt that he ought to have resented it. The impression added another straw to that day's unpleasant gleanings and kept him deep in thought as he walked. Suddenly, a short distance ahead, he saw Jean Lang, also headed for the Great House and evidently coming from the village. He quickened his pace.

In the early afternoon, Miss Lang had gone



to Shank Paddock, to bid her American friend good-bye. That lady, having decided upon departure, wasted no time, and Jean found her in the midst of her belongings, ready to take the afternoon train. The sight was depressing to the girl and she said so.

"'Twill be dull without you," she declared; "nobody to rub off my bad edges on! I shall miss your jolly American ways."

"You'll have my countryman, the Monkton boy," Mrs. Byrd consoled her, but Jean shook her head.

"You forget how busy I am," she replied uncomfortably; "and beside, I am not to be friends with Mr. Monkton—it's orders."

Mrs. Byrd looked at her over the open handbag and set her humorous mouth in an indignant line. "Well, it's a great, little old country all right, all right. I sort of love it myself, when I don't want to shake it.....and the feeling seems mutual. However, that is a fine boy and they are nice people in Philadelphia. Maybe he'll get a bit bored himself visiting in that museum—and if so, seeing he's a Yankee boy, he mayn't take orders."

"But *I* shall have to." Miss Lang spoke with dignity; so that Mrs. Byrd snapped her handbag when she heard it. "He doesn't know our ways, Lady Monkton thinks; and he's a member of the family.....She was perfectly nice about it—and it's largely on my own account, I fancy, that she's being so very careful."

"She wasn't so extremely, especially, Victor-

ianly careful on her own account—if the tales they tell are true,” was Mrs. Byrd’s unsympathetic rejoinder; “but now she lives in a museum and no doubt, keeps herself locked up in a glass-case. I don’t pretend to understand her, Jeanie, my lamb, or them, or the law, or the Coroner, or the country-side generally. My people came originally from somewhere ’round here, but they dropped the guide-book overboard, I guess, before they got to the States.”

While talking, she went to the table and took therefrom a sealed envelope, which she handed to her guest with a look half-quizzical, half-maternal.

“When you were little and used to read fairy stories,” said she, fixing on Jean her steady, blue gaze with a significance that belied her playful words, “remember how the old fairy gave the princess a nut, which she was to crack when her hour of need came? I have a hunch that things may get considerably mixed up around here—and maybe bother you, my lamb. So I’m giving you a nut. I trust you not to open it unless you have to. My address is in it—and—some other things. Good-bye to you, dearie, and good luck!”

She flung on her travelling-cloak and kissed the girl warmly. She seemed to be in a hurry. Jean, mystified, saw the fashionably-clad figure disappear and turned homeward. Her last impressions of her friend were the oddly mixed ones of the handsome, intelligent, serious face—and the elaborate, costly clothes.



As Jean strolled through the beech-wood in the soft air, she kept turning over in her clear, little head the oddities of speech and behavior in Mrs. Byrd of Chicago. The American lady's personality held no trace of melodrama or flightiness. At the moment of action, Jean recalled how calm and unexcited she had been. What did she mean by her suggestion of trouble to come? And from what quarter did it threaten? Jean had inherited a strain of adventurous romance which tintured her natural caution, and this strain had led her to Shank and had attracted her to Lady Monkton. No mood of timidity now affected her, although she had a qualm when she recalled how very much her mother wanted her, and how self-sacrificing she had been to let Jean go out into the world in search of fortune and experience. But Jean knew that her mother's code would not permit her to resign her position now, at this particular moment, when loyalty to one's employer was demanded. Just what Mrs. Byrd foresaw, Jean didn't know, although for some time past there had been one or two dark corners of Shank into which the girl had feared and dreaded to look. She had refused to think of them—she still refused. But how, in the name of all that was inexplicable, had this chance tourist come to light upon these indefinite, non-formulated matters of suspicion? If it was not these matters that she meant, then what was it she knew, and how had she obtained her knowledge?

At this point in her meditations a voice in-

interrupted them. "I'm glad to see you out again," said Dick Monkton, "and how's the wrist?"

He stood a few feet off, and beside him Lady Monkton's terrier stood grinning and wagging its tail.

"My wrist is much better," she answered; "it's getting all straightened out—but my head isn't. I still have a sprain in my mind."

She kept on walking toward the distant towers, and Dick fell into step beside her. "I know. I have one myself," he confessed, "and the inquest certainly didn't explain anything; now did it?"

"Nothing. Who killed that man and why?"

She shook her head over the tangle, and then they both looked again at the Great House they were approaching, with its royal towers raising their heads in pride. The girl spoke the thought of both.

"Shank keeps its own secrets," said she, with a touch of awe. "It's terrible as well as splendid. Sometimes I feel...." She broke off; and it was the young man who, after waiting a moment, completed her sentence:

"....that you rather hate it?"

"How did you know?" She glanced in surprise at his grave face.

"There are times when you show it, while at others....."

"Oh, it's by no means simple, my feeling about Shank," Jean explained; "not just like or dislike." She grew absorbed and spoke freely. "It has a fascination one can't get away from, but



I'm not sure it's wholesome. . . . . I feel the way Michelet describes the women of the Italian Renaissance: 'Elles troublent, corrompent et civilisent!' Shank troubles me, but it civilizes me. . ."

"And so far," her companion added with simplicity, "it has not corrupted you."

Inwardly, he found himself surprised; he had hardly expected from her so eclectic a quotation, and one moreover which voiced his own obscure and inarticulate reactions. There is no shorter cut to intimacy than lies in expressing the thought of another, and Dick began repeating her name to himself as the name of a friend. Meanwhile the girl was pursuing her idea, looking up at him with a moved and sensitive face.

"Well, I don't know. . . . . no doubt in time it may," she confessed. "Look at the calm way we're all taking what has just happened. A violent, mysterious death—and, to Shank, why, it's only another murder added to the crimes of the Past—just an item on its record."

"How do you mean *another* murder?" he said, drawing together his peaked brows.

"There was a nobleman found dead in bed in the Archbishop's day," Jean told him.

"Smothered, apparently. They tied him up in a sack, dropped him out of the window, and buried him in the dogs' graveyard. 'Twas given out his horse had kicked him. A serving-man was knifed once, during a brawl in the brew-house. He walks, the maids tell me. And a lady, who smiled on Piers the first, died very suddenly after dinner in the Oak Parlor—probably of

poison.....He was keeping an Italian dancer at the time and she knew about drugs.....”

“Why, it’s a charnel-house!” Dick cried out.

“All such old mansions are. Like famous jewels, they are held by bloody hands. And that’s not the worst, to my thinking,” Jean continued, fire running through her speech and burning in the eyes she lifted to the man beside her. “When you remember the souls that have been murdered—stifled—and the happiness and goodness poisoned, just to uphold that!”

He nodded.

“I think of it sometimes, Mr. Monkton, night and day.....The cruelty that never got beyond those walls—the betrayals—the scared, shuddering people living in terror of their sins—and the petty tyranny.....! When I think of the women of Shank—why, it seems a Moloch, feeding on human life.”

She broke off, for she was moved.

“I’m glad,” Richard steadily answered, “that it’s over—that all such things were done with long ago.”

“Long ago!” her voice mocked him, and he thought with a shock he had never seen a face so quivering with intensity. “Yesterday—today! Do you recall that poor little Lady Monkton, deliberately tormented, driven so mad with wretchedness that she ran away at nineteen and drowned herself?”

She had utterly forgotten in her emotion what these words might mean to her companion, till his handsome face went white with the shock



of them. He stood stock-still, looking dumbly down on her. Jean didn't know what to do or say. Overwhelmed with horror at herself, she murmured something, and crimson, turned aside into another path, leaving him to walk slowly towards the house alone.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE LORDS OF SHANK

**T**HE experience of the last few days finally lifted for Dick that veil of illusion and unreality which had obscured life for him during so many months. Change of climate and recovered health, the thick stillness of English nights, the tranquil movement of English summer days—in themselves so restorative to tired nerves—these had helped to give him back his old, active self. But it had needed the stimulus of excitement and danger, the spur of resource and of invention, to rouse in him an awakened sense of reality. He had opened his eyes from a dead sleep the morning after his adventure in the crypt, with a strange restlessness and a determination to be passive in the hands of others no longer. Up to that moment, he had been a pawn in Destiny's game. His father's death and the resulting change in his prospects, the strange invitation, the voyage, the life at Shank, this series of events had subtly laid hold on him, had entangled him in a tempting bewilderment, so that he had wandered away into the dream of



a golden future. Today, he woke; he looked about; he saw people and things as they were; and he could use definite terms to constrain his own sense of duty.

It was delightful to go on this way, visiting in this wonderful place surrounded by things his soul loved—but he must not allow it to befog him. Were he really Piers Monkton's son, he was the owner of Shank and the ownership brought responsibilities with it. The fact must be capable of determination by law; and, in the final result, the rather curious Charles Ventriss and the no less curious Denise Monkton were no more factors than was Dick himself, although they seemed to stand as the enigmatic guardians of his fate.

And if he were *not* Sir Piers Monkton's son—what then? A wave of gay courage, the sweep of recovered dauntlessness had arisen in his soul. . . . . Well, he was yet young; he had a few hundreds still in bank at home; life was full of possibilities, if one started in time. This mood of confidence and faith in the future had endured for several days—it was this mood which Jean Lang's words poignantly struck at and dispersed. A fog of suspicion, uneasiness and perplexity was let in upon his mind to darken its outlook. This picture she evoked of a girl tormented, miserable, flying from what? So afraid—afraid of what? afraid to the point of seeking death. That young woman! It was a picture which Dick could not bear. He struggled with the pain of it, standing alone in the green quadrangle. Henry VIII's

towers tossed up their gilded vanes; the many paned windows glittered. Blue sky, dotted with puffs of cloud, bent over him; from the eaves doves' voices interchanged their delicate antiphonal; and swallows flashed vividly across the turf. Dick looked upon this beauty, desiring it and dreading it. What spirits owned it for a dwelling place?

He wandered to the Triton fountain and rested on the edge. Poetry, the natural expression of all this, rose to the surface of his troubled thoughts and gave them utterance. "The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power—and all that beauty, all that wealth ere gave" he found himself murmuring. The walls that splendidly enfolded him; by what memories were they ruled? What ghosts walked through those halls? Murder and lust and tyranny—were these the lords of Shank? The procession stalked through his imagination—selfish prelate and cruel monarch at the head—behind them the haughty, narrow, greedy owners of the place—and at the end, two that walked ever together, close together, moving jealously through those rich rooms—so cherishing, so intense! The one sour, dull, vain—wholly dominated by that fiery other, with his artist's face and fanatic eyes. Was it from them the little girl-ghost so desperately fled, her baby in her arms, or from the smiling triumph of another woman hovering in the background, with her subtle eyes?.....

"I have had a letter from Charles."

Denise Monkton's voice broke the stillness.



Richard had dined with her in the long twilight, and she did not ask any questions concerning his afternoon's walk. His mood was a little silent and Lady Monkton respected that silence. She herself tended to be silent—she waited for his speech and ministered to his mood in that skilful way she had—restfully preserving her own cool independence of spirit—and sometimes gazing at him half drowsily and contemplatively—the way a Persian cat looks at one when it desires to be quiet.

After dinner was over, Denise trailed her white draperies to the rose-garden, and they sat side by side there like a pair of comrades with their cigarettes. Full June breathed its perfume upon the air, and Dick closed his eyes to savor it. . . . . The beauty spread about him, soothed his soul and caressed it, charming the evil thoughts to rest and torment him no longer. . . . .

“Ah, you have heard at last!”

“He writes from Paris—but he does not know just when he will be home.”

“Had he heard about—?”

“He read it in the newspapers. He says he's so glad nothing happened!” Her voice rippled into laughter. “Of course, Charles means—nothing happened to Shank!”

“That's what he would think of first, of course,” Dick said. “I guess he wouldn't care about the man.”

Her face was still smiling as she turned to him. “A dead burglar more or less would mean noth-

ing to Charles!" she said mockingly. "Why should it?"

"Are you convinced Stern *was* a burglar?"

Surprise made Lady Monkton straighten in her chair. "Why, what else could he be?" The plain question made Dick's doubt harder to define.

"Why was nothing missing or disturbed? Why did those two men fight.....? I have a feeling that Stern was shot, perhaps, for a very different reason."

"What reason?"

"Let us say because he recognized somebody."

She did not answer for a few moments, and when she spoke her voice was troubled.

"That's a horrid thought.....Do you suspect anyone definitely?"

"How could I, Lady Monkton? Since the inquest I have been considering, and it doesn't seem to me that robbery explains this mystery....." She noticed his manner; it was reflective and mature and she looked sideways at his thoughtful face. "After all, there are no valuables in the place where Stern was found. He had lots of chances before we turned up—why didn't he make use of them? No: it's more intricate than that, I feel sure."

"Tell me what you really think."

"I think," he said directly and openly, "that there was some plan—perhaps *not* for burglary. I think there was to be a meeting, pre-arranged, that night and safe in that part of Shank. Some-



thing went wrong.....maybe the meeting was interrupted.....maybe the man Stern met was not the one he expected.....maybe he saw some face he knew—maybe he died defending Shank, after all.”

She thought over all this. “You are very ingenious, Richard,” she said unwillingly. “I had not thought you so—so observant. But you are wrong: because your idea would mean there is someone in the house—”

“I believe there *is* someone in the house. Do you know all about that man Hays?”

“Hayth?” Her voice was mildly astonished and she lisped the name at him.

“His face is untrustworthy, and I’ve seen him tipsy—” but Denise Monkton cut him short with a quiver of laughter, having indeed a note in it close to hysteria.

“Oh, poor Hays! My dear boy—you are quite wild—Charles would laugh at you! He saw to the man’s references—they were perfectly in order—he was a Duke’s man, if I recall. Oh, no! He can’t help his ugly face, you know—and as for drinking occasionally—they all do it—all of them, more or less.” She laughed again and Dick was silent. His feeling was that the whole matter had affected his hostess’s nerves. When he next spoke, his tone was light and soothing.

“Well, it’s all over now anyhow.....I won’t bother you with my theories. I hope Mr. Ventris will soon return, and you can talk it all over with him.”

“With Charles? If I know, he won’t be in the least interested. He writes that he’s had a wonderful stroke of luck and he can think of nothing else. Wait,—here’s a clipping from a French newspaper—”

It was only nine o’clock and still light enough to read by. Lady Monkton unfolded the newspaper and rapidly translated for Dick’s benefit.

“The distinguished antiquarian and palæographist, Mr. Charles Ventris, has just announced an important discovery, recently made by him while touring in Italy and the south of France. Mr. Ventris is chiefly known to connoisseurs by reason of his connection for many years past with the famous collections at Shank Park. These unsurpassed groups of paintings, furniture and manuscripts were placed under his charge by the late owner, Sir Piers Monkton, with the result that they are now at the highest point of perfection. This expert’s peculiar knowledge of works of art has identified him during the last thirty years, with the discovery of several remarkable objects. Among these is the famous Monkton Missal and the no less wonderful “Treyze Saintes Hystoires du Jean de Braq,” which was unearthed by his labors in 1892, from a secret cupboard in the remains of the ecclesiastical palace at Shank House. He reports his latest find to be an unfinished but superb 14th century Canticles, in folio, containing fifty-four leaves, most of which are elaborately bordered, with an intricate floreate design of ivy leaves in gold and colors, interspersed with exquisite angel’s heads and grotesques of men and animals.....The initials, large and small, are in burnished gold and many colors, including some extremely rare tints. The text is written in clear, large Gothic character, sixteen long lines to a full page with comparatively few contractions, and is evidently the work of a skilled French scribe of the middle 14th century. Neither the script nor the borders, however, contain the unique features of this beautiful object of art. ‘I was amazed,’ the finder writes, ‘to discover four large miniatures of surpassing beauty, unequalled by any I have ever exam-



ined. The Bedford Missal holds nothing finer; and these paintings are evidently the work of one of the unnamed masters of the art. A friend attributes them without hesitation to the Fiorentini, Jacopo and Silvestro, whose work delighted Lorenzo Magnifico. Tenderness of sentiment, firmness of composition and grouping, delicacy of execution and play of fancy, reach a high point, and enrapture all who have gazed on them.' Only four of the eight miniatures are completed, and the textual decorations extend no further than Cant. VI. The volume has evidently lost its first binding and is encased in a comparatively unimportant example of embossed leather over boards, with the remains of a reliquary in the lid. Even in its unfinished state the MS. is valued at no less than £8,000 and is doubtless destined to enrich the noble collection at Shank House."

When she made an end of reading, she smiled happily at her companion. "Isn't Charles wonderful? Yes, it was he who hunted till he found the Treyze Hystoires. The Archbishop had taken it from some obscure monastery, and so he'd never dared exhibit it. He kept it hidden away in a secret cupboard in the wall of his palace. Charles had come across the rumor of this story in some ancient records. He made the discovery. Isn't he wonderful—Charles?"

Dick agreed that he was indeed wonderful.

"I'm glad he's returning," said Dick, his gaze dwelling upon the tracery of black chimney against silver twilight, "because I do want a talk with him about my business. When I came here, I was all in—I'd been sick and had a shock and—you know—you saw me. So I just accepted. But I mustn't go on doing that for always. And I've been thinking out lately things for myself."

She observed him, but without interruption.

"I feel more and more," he went steadily on, to her growing surprise and dismay, "that Mr. Ventriss and you have been misled about me. Because, Lady Monkton, the man I call my father was simply incapable of carrying away somebody else's child and passing it off as his own."

She set an obstinate mouth and her glance was watchful and anxious. "Any man would have done so, I think, under the circumstances. . . . Remember. . . he was away at the time. . . . Has it occurred to you, Dick, that he may not even have known who the baby really was?"

"*That*," cried he with a scornful snort, "is even more impossible than the other!"

"My dear child, men don't always know about their wives!"

"Perhaps not here. They do at home."

Lady Monkton considered this remark with a sort of despair, confronting for the first time in her experience the incurable idealism of the American.

"And then," Dick persisted, "there would have been something in my memory to confirm it. I've not forgotten Mother. I was six when she died. Surely, there would have been something—a remark, a look. No! I doubt it—I keep on doubting!"

The woman beside him had been forced during more than one crisis in the past to overcome masculine restiveness; and she had been invariably successful. Once again she evoked a troubling charm, which had lost but little of its potency



with the years. Her voice out of the dusk had a halting music; she did not omit to lay upon his wrist her warm, electric hand.

"Richard, these things are so subjective. I doubted, too, at first.....I thought Charles carried away.....But in these six weeks I've seen you, I've grown convinced! You *are* Piers Monkton's son.....I would swear to it in any court of law."

Her hand clung where it lay; her voice, her touch—she expected these to thrill. But they didn't alter by a shade the absorbed, troubled, yet affectionate glance he turned on her.....  
"Strange child that he is!" she wondered.....

"I wish I wanted to be his son!"

She misunderstood him. "Ah, you fear so magnificent an heritage?"

"No: it's another heritage I fear."

Still she didn't comprehend him, and her look showed it. The look made him want to be rough.

"How about—my mother? A girl of nineteen driven by unhappiness to kill herself! Think of it—a girl of nineteen!"

"Somebody has been talking to him," Lady Monkton thought, and her expression held just the proper shade of distress.

"She was insanely jealous, of course. Jealous of Piers' work, of his collections, of his friends—jealous, if you like, of me."

Her openness was disarming, she met his embarrassed eyes quite frankly. "Jealous *without cause*," she firmly insisted.

They rose simultaneously, and she linked her

arm in Dick's and walked beside him, her lisping utterance both eager and caressing.

"Piers made no love to me—but it was natural he should turn to me for sympathy because he knew how I felt about Shank. Could I help that he preferred to talk to me instead of that narrow-minded little Lucy? She hated Shank; I adored it; I studied it, worked over it. She felt it as a rival. Why, when Piers asked her to lend him £5,000 that he might buy back that final Hoppner—the one that rounds out the group—his wife refused. Charles had to get it for him outside. Imagine, she refused! Oh, she was altogether impossible—!"

"She rushed away to kill herself," Dick persisted, with wretched emphasis. "Between you all, you made her too miserable to live. She took her own life. I can't bear to think of it."

Absorbed in his own feeling, he did not see that the gleam in Lady Monkton's eyes was not a pleasant one. But she played an ancient rôle and she had great self-confidence. . . . She walked beside the young man for a pace or two, then set her two hands upon his shoulders, and forced his eyes to meet her own.

"Ah, Richard," she said, exquisitely; "how is it that you feel so for her—if she is not your mother?"



## CHAPTER XVIII

### SEVEN BRANCHES OF THE OLIVE-TREE

“**W**HERE did I find it? Where does anybody find anything? By looking for it where nobody else ever thought to look!”

M. Charles sat in his favorite chair, opposite the Cornaro Luini in the Oak Parlor. His travelling cloak was still about him. He looked worn from the journey and the heat; his pallor was marked; his eyes were puffed and weary; but the music of his gay voice rang clear as of old. On his knees he held a case containing his new treasure, and his finger-tips caressed it. They sat eagerly about him, Lady Monkton and Richard one on each side, while at a discreet distance, but no less interested, was Jean Lang....

“There still remain, my dear Diccon, on the borders of Italy and France, ruins of convents and monasteries which had been overlooked at the time of the French Revolution or in the later periods of dispersal. They were small, perhaps, or harmless, and were left to die a natural death by inanition..... Their libraries, if there were any, drifted to the village church sometimes to

be sold, sometimes not. Perhaps the chest of manuscripts, books, fragments, was piled away in a crypt or a vestry—to be forgotten. I know that hill country and I knew where to look—that's all."

"But still," Dick protested, "such religious communities were poor—how came they to possess these treasures? Even in the old time, it was only the richer monasteries that ever owned them."

"Not always: and that," smiled Mr. Ventris, "is another story! But—am I boring you, Denise?"

It was just his cunning way to whet their appetite, by anticipation. He glanced, still smiling, from one face to the other; and he still kept his long hand upon the case on his knees. Then he narrated:

"Many of the great abbeys and monasteries of the Renaissance, we know to have contained thousands of manuscripts; they were nothing less than huge circulating libraries. St. José-sur-Mer, for example, as early as the 9th century, carried on a vigorous trade with England. Manuscripts were loaned, interchanged; rented for the use of copyists. I happened to stay during my trip at a village on the road over the mountains which led to the monastery of Bobbio in Lombardy—one of the most celebrated dépôts of the old time.....They used to send their volumes into France on muleback, guarded only by patient monks and over that winding road,



swarming with robbers—Are you answered, Diccon?”

“You think this one was stolen?”

“Stolen—or merely thrust into the old church chest in fear—as a temporary abiding place. Who knows, and what does it matter? To my mind, its presence on that hill-track is amply accounted for.”

Dick was fascinated.

“Which would also account for the rather plain binding. Illuminations of this quality generally have a more sumptuous dress.....But if, as I believe, the small caravan was attacked, its escort slain, the books carried off, then rich bindings would be stripped off first of all for their gold and jewels. This one is evidently much later.....How I wish we could add it to the hoard at Shank!”

“Ah, can we not?” Lady Monkton’s voice was full of disappointment, and he looked at her rebukingly.

“No—no—Denise! This one is for sale—already I’ve started.....There will be a great sale this autumn and this item must stand at the head.....You must have forgotten our need of money.” She was silent.

“This will be a piece,” he continued, “that has not been offered for years. But of that you shall judge for yourselves—you shall see.....By the way, Denise, I ought to tell you that I expect every day to have an offer from the Duke of Bradford, and I think I shall accept it. Barring our own here, there is no collection finer

than that at Grantchester Hall.....I should rather that the Canticles go there than anywhere, except, perhaps, the British Museum; and that is out of the question.....they cannot afford it. Undoubtedly there will be in time an American offer, probably larger, but I do not want to wait.....The Duke knows that.....”

While he talked on in this fashion he removed the wrappings from the case which he opened. The folio he drew forth was in a worn wooden binding with rusty clasps, and Mr. Ventris deprecated it with a slight, apologetic gesture.

“When I first saw this, I hardly glanced at it—some old mass-book, I thought—nothing of real value would have so mean a case! and I examined everything else first.....Then I unclasped it.....”

He suited the action to the word, with a toss of the head having a characteristic touch of melodrama. Miss Lang held in her hand the moveable bulb and directed its rays on the page. They looked, and remained silent, except that Denise Monkton drew a deep and startled breath.

What opened to them was just that sudden little vision of the heavenly country which must have come to the medieval monk in the dawn of a summer morning; a blaze of color, soft yet brilliant, blue and rose-red and gold and silver and mauve and green, on a page of purple-tinted sheepskin. The first miniature was large, its frame taking up half the page.....the text encircled with border of intricate and elaborate design of tiny roses, buds and leaves and flowers,



birds and animals disporting themselves in the garlands. These same flowers repeated themselves in the background of the miniature, where they jewelled the garden space for the immortal lovers, who walked among them.....

"See, the woman's figure looks like Lady Monkton," Jean Lang said, the first to break silence. Mr. Ventris gave a happy little chuckle at the conceit, and Denise Monkton herself smiled as she bent over the picture. But her smile gave way to a look of bewilderment when she examined the figures closer, because the tiny features of the woman did have a cast resembling her own. Charles Ventris turned the page, explaining, admiring, commenting. "They did not think the text up to standard in Paris—yet, to my mind, it's very fine and I've never seen a lovelier initial. Do you note the angel-faces peeping out of the roses—there—in Canticle III? One or two errors I found—chiefly in the contractions. Of course, there should be eight miniatures and there are only four.....I wonder what interrupted the poor artist at his work and caused him to leave this lovely thing incomplete? Do you suppose death claimed him? Perhaps he saw so beautifully into the heavenly country because he was very near to it himself....."

"That miniature," said Jean in an awed voice, "is the finest that I ever saw except one—and that was by Angelico."

"Oh, surely not.....!" the owner murmured. "But do you realize, my friends, what this would have been worth if it had only been complete? Priceless. Money would hardly have bought it."

"If it had, you would never have let it go, Charles.....you would have kept it yourself."

"Perhaps you are right. What do you think of it, Dick?"

"I think it is—wonderful."

Had it not been for an interruption, as unexpected as it was welcome, M. Charles might have noticed that his young friend's tone was thoughtful. But the message, concerning some packing-cases which had just arrived from the railway, was an urgent one, and M. Charles left the Oak Parlor immediately, accompanied by Lady Monkton. The two young people remained, therefore, side by side alone together, gazing down on the great Canticles, which spread open its leaves before them in all their appealing loveliness.

"Look, Mr. Monkton, at the border. I have never—"

"Miss Lang.....are you sure it is genuine?"

The question came like a blow, and she shrank before it. "What do you mean?" she gasped.

"Only this—it is so very strange. Look closely, look here!"

Her first thought—that Yankees loved a jest, both in and out of season—was dispelled by the seriousness of his face. Her eyes followed his pointing finger and bent over the painting. It was the last of the four. There sat the king's daughter, robed and crowned as a bride awaiting her lover. Around the border and framework, angels and amoretti danced, scattering flowers,



and each tiny face wore a visible look of joy. At the bride's feet ran a silver stream, wherein birds drank and fluttered. Overhead, a pale sky was dappled with puffs of cloud. Beyond the garden close, where the spice bushes and pleasant fruits bent before the coming of the south wind, was a background of hills, on whose rounded tops the sunshine rested in a golden peace. An olive tree at the left-hand corner was traced against the sky.

When Jean raised her head from this picture, still in bewilderment, it was to see that Monkton had laid another book before her, which during her absorption, he had procured from the open case near-by. This was the Virgil Mr. Ventris had bought at his father's sale and given him. With a gesture, he urged her to look. In that picture now opened, which was smaller, simpler and darker in coloring, Æneas parted from Dido in a garden sloping to the bay, where his curly little ship awaited him. Beyond, was a background of hills on whose rounded tops the sunshine rested in a golden peace. An olive-tree, in the left hand corner, was traced against the sky.

While Miss Lang looked and looked, her companion's voice could be heard, as from a distance, saying:

"The sun lies—*so*—upon the third hill..... That olive-tree has seven branches, four to the right, three to the left....."

She lifted her head; he checked. Their eyes were turned from the contemplation of the two

pictures to look upon one another, and both were troubled.....

"The Virgil is French and at least one hundred and fifty years earlier than the Canticles.....Can—can M. Charles have been deceived?"

"It is strange, very strange; a remarkable coincidence—and yet....."

"Coincidence! It cannot be! Why, that olive tree has the same arrangement of the same number of branches.....!"

She began to talk very fast.

"You see, the backgrounds are often mere conventions, just as the borders are.....One painter borrowed from another where his own inventive fancy, perhaps, failed him. No doubt both of these were copied from some still earlier picture.....You know how it is on the stage—in Shakespeare's plays, where the actors reproduce stage business, which has come down to them by tradition, centuries old. I've heard of such things, of course.....It is—it *must* be that."

He listened, but half-convinced. "If the things were not so beautiful—but it is so ravishingly beautiful..... You say you have seen such repetitions before?"

She stood above the folio, one hand resting protectingly upon it—she fixed her eye on a distant corner of the room and went on talking, like a machine that has been wound up.....

"Not *seen*, Mr. Monkton, but *heard*, oh, yes yes! Everyone knows about the duplication of the conventional background, oh yes! Here it



is startling because one doesn't see it usually in so fine an example—generally it is reserved for inferior work. No doubt, however, when I study this more carefully, with my magnifier, the brush-strokes will show themselves as unmistakeably of the two periods.....”

He thought her manner oddly concentrated, but he was aware of a vast confidence in her. Miss Lang gave one that feeling of trust.....

“I see. But M. Charles.....shall I call his attention to it—ought I?”

Miss Lang picked up the Virgil and crossed the room to the case where she locked it up before replying.

“I think, Mr. Monkton, that just now I would not mention the matter to M. Charles.....”

“You mean—it would be a jar—he is so happy?”

She repeated abstractedly.....

“It would be a jar—he is so happy.” And then, as Dick remained silent, plainly still troubled and perplexed, she suddenly wheeled round upon him to add: “M. Charles is one of the foremost experts living in this work.....It stands to reason he would know were anything wrong; doesn't it?”

“I suppose so. But he may have forgotten the olive-tree in the Virgil.”

“He may not need to remember it.” Her manner was now natural again, and she half laughed. “I think that you and I might make ourselves a little ridiculous in his eyes, may we not? I will take occasion one of these days to use my most

powerful lens on the olive-tree and if there is anything to tell I shall report it. There, will that do?"

"Certainly, if you think best."

She paused once more above the Canticles and touched it with her finger-tips.

"Meanwhile, this little oddity shall be a secret between us. Don't let us spoil his joy in his return.....?"

"Of course not—dear M. Charles!" Dick murmured and glanced down upon the olive-tree. When M. Charles re-entered the room, he found the young man still standing there absorbed; and the curator's face and eyes shone with gratification.....

An hour later, the Canticles was locked in the safe; the secretary had returned to the Scriptorium, though it was late; and Mr. Ventriss was still talking with Denise. They had gone over the details of the attempted burglary and the burglar's mysterious death. M. Charles had asked many, many questions.

"I have told Gapper at the Guard-house not to admit the public for a week or so," Lady Monkton told him. "We must really run no risks if it *was* a plot, and my nerves are strained."

"I am not surprised. The experience was alarming. Tomorrow I shall see the police about it. Meanwhile, I would not worry, Denise—"

He was still pacing the length of the room, his hands behind his back. He seemed restless and strained, and she turned to look at him.

"You look very tired, Charles."



"I am dead tired—travelling day and night does not suit me. And then the constant anxiety about the succession."

"I know. But there is nothing new."

"No word from the Antarctic since I've been away?"

"Practically nothing. You recall that the ship is not yet near the explorers and could not hope to hear anything from the Expedition for months."

A silence fell. All the portraits in the Oak Parlor seemed to be looking down and waiting.

"Charles?"

The note in her voice drew the man quickly to her side. He bent over her.

"Dear—what troubles you?"

"Is the game worth the candle?"

"Is Shank worth a rush-light, much less you and me!"

"All this legal pother and struggle! You have no further proof. We may be misleading this lad to bitter disappointment. Suppose we were to withdraw and let things take their course. After all—"

He broke upon her mild argumentative tone as a storm breaks. "And abandon Shank to Ly-cett Monkton—see the pictures and the manuscripts and the silver all go to the Americans! Could you bear that?"

"I think perhaps I could bear anything—if I could only be myself—" Her confused murmur died out in the flash with which he answered—

"Well, *I could not!*"

She caught his hand imploringly and began to speak very low and fast, turning wide-open eyes up to him.....

“Charles—I grow afraid! I do not understand but I am more and more afraid! Haven’t I *always* done as you wished?”

“Well, have you ever repented it?” His tone half laughed at her. “What were you, Denise, what would you have been, but for me? An obscure secretary or governess somewhere. Think of what you are now!”

“I do not want to think. I—have never been happy!”

When he saw the tears in her eyes, his face grew still and cold. But his voice kept its gentle charm.

“I know. Who better? It’s not for long now, dear. Richard will let us have one of the small houses near to Shank—just as we always planned—and when his affairs are settled I think there will be money. One more lucky find like this and—”

At his words she quivered from head to foot. “But suppose—Charles—suppose—I am afraid, I tell you. Your judgment is not what it was. If Dick—”

He had been holding her hand with all his affectionate courtesy; but she felt his grasp grow deliberately limp, and he turned an indulgent eye upon her as one looks at a fanciful child. His lips too curled a trifle disdainfully, his carven face had no touch of uncertainty—never a touch of doubt! Ere he had time to reply, his



ear caught the sound of an approaching foot-fall, and he shook off her clinging, chillfingers.

"William." he warned her, and walked over to the hearth rug as the footman knocked.

"A trunk call for you, sir, on the telephone."

Mr. Ventris hurried out, leaving her ladyship reclining as usual in her favorite bergère. Before her an open casement gave to her eyes the familiar miracle of moonlight on the terrace. Behind her, all the great portraits, brought into life by the lights under them, seemed suddenly to have concentrated their gaze upon her. Denise had had such fancies before, nerves, she supposed; but suddenly they were more than she could bear—she stiffened, afraid to turn ~~her~~ head. All those painted people were looking at her—and oh! they knew! The cold eyes of Holbein, the serenity of Van Dyck, the indulgent tolerance of Reynolds, the direct, piercing simplicity of Hoppner—all looked, all recognized, all understood. In that gaze they accepted her . . . . . She had always felt in her terrified soul that the portraits knew—knew more than people, because they had become immortal and omniscient. . . . . The Archbishop, who openly caressed the ivory limbs of Venus, *he* knew of the past, and his insolent sympathy made her cheeks burn. That cold and fanatic Piers the first—*he* understood those small, carefully careless dialogues with Lucy Monkton, the studied torture, incessant pricks of cruelty, under which her weak nature drooped. All had seen day by day the dexterity with which Piers had been en-

tangled, the vigilant and skilful play of her tact and enthusiasm, until his sour nature was roused and she had become as indispensable to him as Charles had been.....

A sense of being watched, seen, understood, flowed suddenly over Denise in an icy current. She could not turn nor speak, she was frozen—oppressed. That legion of fallen angels hovered over her, she almost fancied she could hear them breathe and rejoice..... Oh, was this terror—this terror of the future—*their* doing? Did they triumph over her? Was this suffocation, intolerable setting to life—was this what is called remorse? If Charles would only return, what kept him so long away?

When at length Mr. Ventris opened the door, her evil fancies dissolved; the relief was unspeakable. For a moment she closed her eyes and sighed; then looked at him and sat erect, because it was plain from his face that he had news.

“Was it London?”

“Yes, Scrope.” He went over to the bell and rang it. “Where’s Diccon?”

“Why—have you heard—?”

“Yes. I have great news.” His face was alive with triumph. “Mary McNeil has been found. She turned up at Scrope’s office this afternoon!”



## CHAPTER XIX

### THE LEGAL MINUET

**M**R. Ingleby Scrope had offices in Lincoln's Inn Fields, in the congenial atmosphere of darkness and dust. Notwithstanding the mediæval flavoring to his name, he was the most modern of precise solicitors, with a literal eye and short-cropped side-whiskers, a worshipper from the heart of the God of Things as they Are, All his life he had been an estate solicitor, witnessing, without envy, the rise of the new and powerful group of corporation attorneys, who, more and more in England, tend to Americanize this branch of the legal profession. Their fees were enormous, but Mr. Scrope's was the easier life, for peers are less exacting clients than millionaires. Mr. Scrope also had a weakness for gentlefolk. His leisure tasks lay in the same direction—he was authority on old Church silver and therefore had been exceedingly congenial to the late Sir Piers Monkton.

It was this professional element which had made Mr. Scrope so usefully active during the painful weeks, nearly twenty-five years ago,

which had followed the death of Sir Piers' first wife.....and of which his memory, on the August morning when we make his acquaintance, was still so clear. Mr. Scrope had suffered, almost personally, from the scandal of that incident. His energy had been the core and centre of it. He it was who planned the sad search for the heir's body (which came to nothing), who prepared statements concerning the mother's mental condition. He had done everything to spare Sir Piers, and he well recalled that this effort had included a series of advertisements for the woman named Mary McNeil. This woman had been young Lady Monkton's maid at the time of her marriage, and her impertinent defence of some vagary of her mistress's had caused her instant dismissal by Sir Piers himself. Lady Monkton had taken the loss of her attendant very hard—hating the trained nurse substituted for her. For this reason, Mr. Scrope thought that it might well have been Mary McNeil with whom Lady Monkton passed those hours which elapsed before her body was found in the Thames, or, if not, that at least Mary McNeil would be the person to cast light upon her possible reasons for suicide. But the earth seemed to have swallowed the woman, and the advertisements elicited no response, direct or indirect.

Mr. Scrope knew something of the attitude of McNeil's class; its dread of the law; its intense desire to avoid any publicity, which, whatever the cause, inevitably resulted in a loss of earning



power. Her silence therefore never surprised him, and a renewal of advertising after such a long period, had been, in his opinion he frankly said, a foolish waste of money. He did not fail to point out to Charles Ventriss that such advertising would probably only bring down upon them the annoyance of imposture, and, when an elderly north-country woman presented herself at his office, he merely had a weary sense of his own good judgment. This was not the first interview. After the second, Mr. Scrope had taken the serious step of a trunk call to Shank. The atmosphere of Lincoln's Inn Fields fosters suspicion; nor is it to be supposed that Mr. Scrope was prepared to accept the story told him by the person calling herself Mary McNeil. But he could no longer ignore it.....

The day was one of a warm midsummer and even the pale London sunshine glowed at the noon hour. The trees seen out of Mr. Scrope's windows were already parched. Standing to gaze at them, hands in pockets and humming a little tune to himself, was the eminent K. C., Sir John Flippin. Mr. Scrope, seated at his desk, was aware of the compliment paid him by this gentleman's presence in his office, which had been brought about by an interchange of courtesies well-nigh Chinese in character. When it was arranged to examine McNeil in the presence of the principals, the Claimant had expressed a wish that Sir John be also present: whereat Mr. Scrope gravely shook his head, demurring that this was hardly possible, since McNeil could not

properly be taken to Sir John's chambers in the Temple. Dick, wholly unaware of the hierarchical sanctities of English legal custom, observed with astonishment the ensuing minuet danced by solicitor and barrister to effect the desired conjunction. Sir John, bluff as always, remarked that as McNeil couldn't, he supposed, come to him, he'd just drop in informally at eleven o'clock. To this Mr. Scrope had interposed a shocked protest, that even on so informal occasion he really couldn't hear of such a thing—followed by a "Pooh, pooh!" from Sir John, at which the solicitor had capitulated.....

"He much appreciated Sir John's condescension—of course McNeil's appearing at the Temple was out of the question—Sir John was very good," and so on and so forth. Dick failed to understand why Sir John was so very good; but as he came to see more of legal habits, he realized that after the lapse of three-quarters of a century, Charles Dickens is still their best chronicler.

Sir John came: the long interview took place with its varying excitement for all present, and its crescendo for Richard. When ended, Mr. Scrope's clerk accompanied McNeil and her companion to the tube station for West Kensington. Mr. Scrope himself conducted his clients to the street, and his farewell bow to Lady Monkton, as she stepped into the car, was full of affectionate deference. She said little, as her way was, but her eyes brightened and M. Charles smiled when Mr. Scrope said: "*Au revoir, Sir Richard,*"



while continuing to ignore the puzzled young man's outstretched hand.

The car, with the three of them, soon vanished down the street, and not until then did the solicitor return to his office where he had left the barrister. Then he reseated himself at his desk and busied himself among his papers for a moment or two, wholly aware that the really important conversation was to come.

For some moments, Sir John continued to hum and look out of the window, and Mr. Scrope to wait at his desk, since obviously one couldn't hurry a K. C. When Flippin spoke at length, it was plainly *not* of that which he was considering.

"This will make an immense deal of talk, Scrope."

"Oh quite, Sir John. Very much so, indeed!"

"I remember the scandal the original affair caused when it happened. Sir Piers was lucky in having you to handle it for him, else it would have been even worse. I remember that even Her Majesty, the Old Queen, was shocked when she heard of it. But it was skilfully hushed up; very, in my opinion."

Mr. Scrope looked gratified, as he felt. "It was an extremely painful affair, Sir John. But on account of Shank I did my best. And I always felt the poor little lady must have been quite mad."

"Did you, now? Well, I can't say that I did. . . . Of course it was before I took silk and I was too busy to be going about much—but still one

hears things and there were people who thought that Lucy Monkton had cause, y'know!"

Mr. Scrope shifted some papers on his desk, and looked as if he would like to take snuff if he had only known how. "As to that, Sir John, I can't deny I know what you mean—as man of the world. Sir Piers perhaps was rather too wedded to Shank to be a really ardent bridegroom—"

"He was a poor bigamist—as I remember!"

"And—ah—there must have been incompatibility—but of course the lady was insane."

"I heard you just now address the young gentleman as Sir Richard?"

Mr. Scrope laughed a thought self-consciously. "Well, in Lady Monkton's presence—and more out of compliment to her, I did venture. Then, after the really remarkable testimony we had been hearing—"

"But, I say, Scrope, what *was* the child's name—not Richard now?"

"On account of the mother's health, the infant had not been christened. Of course he would have been Piers the seventh. But the Claimant won't hear of a change—and 'twill do very well! There was a Richard during James II, if my memory holds," Mr. Scrope explained.

"I see." And Sir John again shifted away from the subject which lay between them by saying, as he came from the window and took a chair near the solicitor, "The Claimant and I met on shipboard. I found him a most engaging lad, but if I mistake not he is going to prove something of a disappointment to Charles Ventris.



He is by no means so docile as he appears." Then as Scrope looked puzzled he added: "The succession lies close to Ventris' heart on account of his hatred of Lycett Monkton. That I realize is a factor, as you must. The question is how much of a factor?"

"Even if this be true, Sir John—and no doubt Mr. Ventris' feeling about Shank has caused him to pursue this enquiry very hard—still, one can't get over the letters, and the story, can one?"

Sir John drew his heavy brows together and dropped the superficial tone he had been using for one more serious and professional.

"Quite so. I don't deny, Scrope, the evidence was very striking. I was impressed by it—and I'm not surprised that you were. When I first saw the lad, I knew him for a very Monkton. Still there are points which one must take up, because if one doesn't, the Attorney-General is bound to. Its being a Baronetcy is awkward. The Royal Warrant of 1910 is hardly enough—such cases *ought* to come before the Committee of Privileges—"

"Oh, I can't agree with you there, Sir John—the petition through the Home Secretary—"

But Sir John brushed away the technicalities involved in the assumption of a Baronetcy, in order to get back to his main theme.

"For instance, did McNeil account to you convincingly for her silence at the time of Lady Monkton's death and since?"

"I think," Scrope answered him modestly but firmly, "that the truth of her story best accounts

for it. For, mark, Sir John, if she had no reason to remain silent, would she have done so? Doesn't this explain it?"

Sir John appeared struck.

"She had no witnesses to support her story!"

"Lady Monkton identifies her as Mary McNeil."

"And that's enough, of course. But afterwards? The vague part of the whole seems to me that she cannot produce anyone who saw her with the infant which she had care of for some twelve or fifteen hours."

"That doesn't seem strange to me when you recall how such people live!"

"There must have been servants at Mr. Richard Monkton's house at Chelsea. If we advertise—"

"It's twenty-four years past, Sir John, with the War between. Moreover, it's unfortunate she doesn't remember just whereabouts the house was. As to that, there may be a clue in the States, though I am not sanguine."

"There may be.... The case itself, and the status of the Claimant are new to me," Sir John pursued with an inward eye. "We've had Claimants down to modern times. The Annesley Case—the Douglas Cause—the Tichborne Case. The first comes the nearest to this, I believe. Here, you see, is no question opened as to birth of an heir, or his legitimacy. He is known to have existed—to have been stolen by his mother and not seen after. The question is—was the child drowned or did McNeil take it to Mrs. Richard



Monkton, and is this lad her child or Lady Monkton's child? That is the problem."

"Much complicated by the fact that the Monktons were Americans. Travellers in those days struck no roots and cannot be followed. But I *did* ask Sir—I mean the Claimant—if no letters could be found which would settle that point and he told me he feared not," Mr. Scrope said, taking off his eye-glasses.

"He explained the cause to me long before I knew he claimed anything—or he knew it himself. The War drew its eraser over that family and obliterated all traces. There was a little tragedy in Philadelphia."

"Tut—tut—tut," said Mr. Scrope sympathetically. "Still, there ought to be somebody—some friend or relative in whom Mrs. Richard Monkton would confide if she expected or had borne a child in England?"

"The lad tells me not. I mean," Sir John corrected, "not anyone now living who would be likely to have preserved such letters, of which the dates are so vital. His own appearance in his native place in due course was natural and not questioned by anyone. No: there is no lead in the States, I fear."

A pause fell, which was broken by Mr. Scrope who was a little busier than the barrister that morning. "Little can be done in the matter till the Michaelmas Term. Meanwhile I shall bestir myself, as there must be another examination of McNeil—and affidavits must be taken— This fellow Coles—"

"I do not like his looks. That tilted head is hateful."

"Nor I—and his intention is undisguised. But still, he is frank enough about it, which is to his credit. The letters are apparently genuine. Their evidence is of value. Meanwhile the petition must be made through the Home Secretary."

"Of course. You will keep me informed?"

"You are very good, Sir John. I appreciate it, and I shall do myself the honor to wait on you with anything new that may turn up."

Sir John assured him that a clerk with a message was all that was necessary, while Mr. Scrope deprecated such an unimaginable proceeding as his sending his clerk to Sir John's chambers instead of coming himself. The atmosphere in fact had resumed its *chinoiserie*, which of course meant that the conference was about to terminate. Mr. Scrope conducted his guest downstairs with some ceremony and a "Mind the turn, Sir John," and did allow himself to add slyly, by way of farewell: "Present my compliments to *Sir Richard* when you see him and tell him I am happy to serve him. By the way, Mr. Ventris has personally arranged for the payment of a suitable allowance. Thank you—good-bye!"

Of these words, Sir John was thinking as he made his way, a little later, along St. James's to his Club. What a romance in the life of this young man! And how lucky for Charles Ventris to make such a find as this marvellous Canticles over which collectors were gloating, just at the moment when prices for such things were at the



peak! The Duke of Bradford, it was said, had offered £8,000, and there were Americans in the market who might go even higher. Very fortunate for Ventriss, who loved luxury and spent a great deal of money—particularly since he was backing the Claimant—and Sir John gave a wry smile, reflecting how much more natural it was to his habit of mind to say the Claimant than the facile title given by Mr. Scrope. “My dear Boy,” was a greeting more natural still, and it was this Dick received when he appeared at his appointment to lunch with the K. C. He looked well, very handsome, his host thought, and less excited than one might have expected.

Sir John was not wholly free from the vanity of liking to be “in the know.” Well aware that various persons present at his Club would immediately guess his tall guest to be the Monkton Claimant, of whom everybody was talking, he was gratified that they could see for themselves the Claimant’s engaging exterior. Richard was bound to be interested in everything—the view of St. James’s with the tall-hatted brigade hastening to its luncheon; the pictures and relics and traditions of the Club itself, which had been a famous gambling place in the 18th century and which still put a guinea aside from each member’s dues to pay the gambling debts of Charles James Fox. Sir John presented his young friend to one or two cronies, and noted the effect upon them. One elderly man, with shaggy white hair, gouty hands and a temperish mouth, looked the youth

over as he sprang from the table and growled out:

"Monkton? Which Monkton? Monkton of Shank? I thought I knew the eyebrows."

Dick looked at Sir John as the old gentleman passed on down the room.

"Yes, 'tis remarkable. The likeness," Sir John agreed, "struck me from the start on the ship. You'll have to get used to the name, my lad. I mean Monkton of Shank."

"I guess so," Dick admitted.

"Scrope tells me Ventriss has arranged with him that you shall have a proper allowance."

The young man went on eating his luncheon. "I have decided," he said quietly, "that I shall *not* accept it."

He spoke so composedly that Sir John, who did not surprise easily, stared at him as if unable to believe his ears.

"But—damn it all! Why not?"

"Oh, well, I feel that way about it," was Dick's half-apologetic explanation. "You were quite all right about the passage-money cheque, and I was an ass. 'Twould have been awfully rude to return it. But this is different, somehow. Suppose it turns out against me? Suppose they turn me down? I've still enough of my own to put up, till it's definitely decided whether I am Monkton of Shank or just—Monkton of Philadelphia."

"And how much is that?" his host asked, with national bluntness.

"Why-y- all told it's just about £200—a thousand dollars," Dick announced hesitating.



Sir John snorted; his substitute for a laugh. "My dear young friend—that won't go anywhere in England, as you'll find. I fear....Why, clothes alone....and you'll have to have a man-servant—"

"I won't have to have anything I don't want and can't pay for," Dick announced. "This is a country of individual freedom, and most of you seem to do what you like."

Sir John admitted the truth of this, but protested till Dick broke in: "You see—it's this way. Suppose—it's decided against me? M. Charles has been tremendously kind. I'd rather not go in debt to him,—Shank is sufficiently in debt to him as it is. When you think," said Dick, warming to his theme, "of his devotion to the place and how he looks after it and Lady Monkton, just because she is his best friend's wife! It's wonderful—why, he's like an American!"

There were naïvetés in this speech before which Sir John felt a certain hesitancy. A curious independence and sensitiveness about money he had noticed in Dick from the first—and he had before across the water encountered it as a paradox in a nation which pursued the dollar so ardently. Americans, Sir John reflected, were often recklessly indifferent to money, perhaps because they had more chance to get it than the elder world had. There were other barbaric idealisms evident in Dick, which presented difficulties. These he supposed were individual since he had not met them in the cynical and acrid world of New York, which was all the America he

knew. He thereupon asked his guest one or two very plain questions about what he supposed to underlie the chivalrous and quixotic attitude of M. Charles toward his late friend's wife, and he was decidedly jarred to find that Dick frankly considered M. Charles long past the age of any possible or impossible sentiment for the other sex.

"What? At his age?" he asked, opening large eyes upon his host, and Sir John winced, because he was several years older than Charles Ventris. The disconcerting value placed on mere youth by the American is always extremely shocking to middle-aged Englishmen.

"Not for an instant would I minimize M. Charles's service to the Monktons," he cautiously observed, pouring himself a glass of claret. — "Won't you have your glass re-filled? No?.... The nation owes him a debt—And his generosity to yourself—admirable! But—in regard to—ah! other relations in life—don't delude yourself, my boy. The lady is gettin' on—and, mind, I don't say Sir Piers ever noticed anything.....but the rest of London did—. 'Tis an old story now." A faint amusement tinged Sir John's matter-of-fact features when he noticed that his companion looked uncomfortable. "Surely—now—as man of the world—you didn't expect it was purely platonic—all that, did you? It wouldn't be likely, now would it?"

"It would at home." Dick asserted loyally, and Sir John twinkled outright.

"Oh come, now, come, come! Even if I grant



you to be idealists—with an amazin' attitude toward your women, (which we think very unwholesome for 'em), still, ain't you a Puritan, rather? After all—many years—a *liaison sacré*—I fancy you have 'em in Philadelphia?"

When Dick, still silent, shook his head, Sir John added: "Oh, but my dear lad! Look at your divorces!" in tones which were evidently intended to be final.

## CHAPTER XX

### ALLEGORY OF THE TREE OF LIFE

**D**ICK'S fortnight in London was crowded: there were houses to see, people to meet. The houses stood in the blue mist of Chelsea down by the river; or in spacious Mayfair squares, with high railings around the plane trees; or in neat Georgian "Crescents;" or in stucco rows looking upon Regent's Park, or each in a mass of rhododendron with the name "Lucknow Villa" or "Cawnpore Lodge" on the gate. They all seemed to his ideas full of inconvenient comfort, reposeful, large, leisurely. All contained things: Battersea enamels, Staffordshire, Worcestershire; Derbyshire pottery, wonderful glass, tapestry, paintings, Italian triptychs and primitives in Tite Street; chinoiserie, and ancestral Reynolds and Hoppners in Mayfair and Park Lane. It made one's head spin to think of all those houses, with their air of discreet reticence and the wonderful old things inside of them. He became aware that not merely Mr. Ventris and Sir John and Lady Monkton knew about such objects, but a whole class learned ancientry along



with its background and its traditions. He observed that when the English began to argue on points of architecture, or periods, or on the relative merits of red and white lacquer, it was just as well for an American to hold his peace and learn.

The apartment at Monkton House was his home and, under the bright materializing influence of midsummer sunshine, the rooms lost their air of mystery and became familiar, although remaining picturesque. To Dick's imagination, the furtive retirement of its back street, the great bare palace which housed this small, brilliant place, were unique—he never entered without a thrill. They seemed to revive an almost insolently secure and leisured past: they gave a romantic setting to his excited thoughts. Meanwhile the garden door stayed locked nor did Dick venture to ask any questions concerning his first night's experience. Under the circumstances, it would have seemed ungracious, and besides, it now partook of a dream quality. He was wholly under M. Charles's influence and moulded to M. Charles's will, with one exception. That exception concerned money, a question whereon they had more than one argument. M. Charles maintained that an allowance belonged to Dick already by right and should therefore be considered merely as an advance. He pointed out that Sir Richard Monkton owed his friends a good appearance and the proper standard of his class. To this the younger man steadfastly opposed his own view, that he was *not* Sir Richard Monkton

until pronounced so by law, and that until so pronounced he preferred to be under as few obligations as possible. M. Charles expected him to give way, but he did not give way; for once the elder man met a will as strong as his own. He was finally forced to submit, which he did with a shrug and an aside to Denise Monkton that he hoped it was not an indication they would find the boy less manageable than they had expected. It surprised him, being his first experience of the paradoxical American, who may love money, but does not reverence it, as the Englishman does. That any sane person should refuse an allowance from an open and honorable source, was as incredible to Charles Ventris as that one should take time away from the study of old manuscripts in order to earn a little more—he failed utterly to see it. The friends dropped the subject, after an appeal to Mr. Scrope in which he said little but, “God bless my soul!” or “Can it be possible?” and bewildered Dick by allusions to his “quixotic” attitude—sending that young man away with the sensation of deep and abiding amazement.

Mr. Scrope however, and his astute client, failed not to make advertising capital out of the Claimant’s stand, which, dexterously directed, was not without effect. Dick found himself quite helplessly “Sir Richard” to the welcoming world he encountered. He had possessed a full share of the transatlantic illusion that the English are a cautious race, never realizing that at bottom they are sentimental and romantic, with so vast a heap



of medieval tinder piled about their daily lives, that any spark of chance may set it ablaze. Dick's good looks, the twist to his eye-brows, the ready quirk to his speech and the smile which he turned to the world—these were quite enough of themselves in certain great houses to make him "Sir Richard" and no longer the Claimant. Moreover, Lycett Monkton had never been known in London and many people felt they had rather see him exploring the Antarctic than as the owner of Shank.

Now all this was very pleasant and gratifying to Charles Ventriss, who undoubtedly liked his ward the more when he found that others liked him. He took Dick about among his friends, male and female, and these were many. He knew everyone in London. — There were huge, bluff, early-Victorian nobles and slight, frail, retired representatives of great families: there were active, pallid, Americanized politicians, sporting men from the shires, actors and writers, poets and barristers. There were experts and authorities on everything from Hindu shrines, to Shakspearean sports and Baxter prints. There were tall and lovely ladies who looked Dick level in the eyes, had deep voices, unfashionable clothes and superb pearls. There were kind, clever old Duchesses, clinging to life through the young around them and hung with garlands of early-Victorian anecdote, like stately buildings for a festival. There were crusty, crabbed, delightful scholars and antiquarians: and there were individualities that seemed highly colored indeed, to one bred

in a society where the first object seems always to lose one's individuality as quickly as may be. Dick particularly loved those people who "didn't do this" or "always wore that": the nobleman who always carried home his own rolls from the baker's: the other who lifted an umbrella equally against sun and rain; the one who always wore a black satin stock. People could afford to be eccentric in this land of the free.

By contrast of course, this custom made the rather highly-colored personality of M. Charles more natural, but he did not lose his charm thereby. Talks with his host remained the great pleasure of Dick's existence. They sat together late under the light of golden bulbs and enshrined in green-blue tapestries. Facing Dick, as he listened, was that little, rare canvas begun by Bellini, finished by Titian and hung against a curtain as crimson as wine. It was known as the "Sixth Allegory"—and was as mysterious as its name. Next it glowed a Giorgione like a black opal. It was a third of the Scripture scenes of which two others hung in the Uffizi and which M. Charles treasured in a passion of pride. These were what Dick's gaze rested on while Charles Ventris ran on about earlier days, how he had discovered the Treyze Hystoires; how his work on the Monkton Missal traced its pedigree back to the great library at Pomposa, near Ravenna. He described the journeys he and Piers Monkton had taken on the Continent, "voyages of discovery," he called them.

"Often we left the carriage in the towns and



went afoot through the villages. Piers was a splendid walker. . . . Such settings out in golden mornings, when the poplars were all a-quiver in the breeze! The sunshine and clouds of those dawns, Diccon, dappled the fields till they looked like a page of the Canticles. I remember one little hamlet where I got a Horae that's now in the British Museum, besides three mass books I sold for over £300 apiece. And there were other things—pottery, enamels, gold-work. . . . The writing, Piers and I did together; very soon the Shank collections were so talked of that anything from them brought the top price. . . . we needed money terribly just then—so we sold as well as bought, and trimmed the collections into perfect form. By and by, your mother's estate—" he paused, seeing his hearer's look and added, with gentleness, "Don't be troubled about that old story, my dear lad. She was not herself you know, and imagined things. . . . I did think Piers to blame and even said so. It takes little to satisfy women and they might as well have it. . . . And after all she tried her best to keep you out of your inheritance."

He waited, but the young man made no comment, either in words or by any lightening in the gravity of his expression, so M. Charles turned tactfully to the subject of his early friends and spoke of that group of experts, to whom the 19th century owed so large a debt in its knowledge of the past.

"We had a Supper Club for years—George Salting—wonderful fella! He knew more about

Oriental art than the rest of us have forgotten, and Woollaston Franks, who used to stay at Shank for weeks and weeks....'Twas Franks arranged our medieval rooms—he died the year you were born.... Yes: he was much my senior and so was Charles Newton, with whom I used to stay at Mitylene....but for the matter of that, so was Piers....”

For a moment of recollection, he sat while the smoke of his cigarette veiled the cameo of his face.

“Well, well — they were good days — those when the world was just rubbing its eyes over the beauty left in it and before it started to maul civilization to pieces as a child tears up a box of old toys! There’s only one thing really worth living for, Diccon — and that’s beauty....I’d have died in the flames of Troy joyfully enough, could I have saved Helen.”

“I can see you!” Dick said and smiled.

“Then too it was good to be a part of the Great World, very good. Rank and estates and wealth are all good things, as you’ll come to appreciate one of these days.”

“Shall I? I’m not so sure.”

“Oh, you will! It’s this way, Diccon,” He had been laughing silently for an instant and then began to talk again, painting a picture in vivid words as his way was.

“There’s a Bellini in the Uffizi—(We’ll run over to Florence in the spring when this tedious business is done)—They call it Allegory of the Tree of Life, but they don’t seem to know what



it means. I know. The foreground is an enclosure—a pale, white marble balustrade enclosing a patterned marble floor. That's the Church, you see. The Tree of Life grows in the middle, with Amoretti playing about and a Madonna, companioned with saints and virtues, smiles and prays from a throne in the corner. Her militant saints, theologians—Augustine is evidently one, and perhaps Jerome with a sword, the other—lean over the paling to protect it; and the saints within are the spiritual ones—St. Sebastian, a youth tall as a lily, pierced with arrows, and beside him that wild, naked, brown St. Anthony of Egypt. . . . . Within the pale of the Church it's all order, and peace and beauty. . . . . Without, is the World with clouds lowering and precipices and horrid cliffs—all danger and fear. There are Poms and Vanities on a hill: and young lovers meeting; and human toil—because a shepherd rests in his cot and a man belabors a donkey. And in one corner— isn't it too delightful?—a holy hermit is in conversation with a centaur!"

His inward-turned smile was full of satisfaction.

"Well—if we turn the allegory into a worldly one for our purposes—'twill serve my meaning! I've lived *outside*, myself, Diccon, most of us do 'cause we have to and it is terrible, full of fear, and bitter winds and lowering storms."

"But there were love and toil, you said?"

"True: but those are within, too! Ah, Diccon, within the pale is best; one may be safe with wealth and beauty to make life worth while."

The American considered this philosophy and finally returned his friend a whimsical glance.

"The thing I'd want most out of the lot is *beyond* the pale," he observed, "To talk with the centaur, I mean."

M. Charles turned his head to regard him and made an odd rejoinder.....

"Ah well, as to that," he said, "you've already mounted the centaur, Diccon, and may go with him some distance!"

A clock chimed: and M. Charles sprang lightly up.

"How I run on—but you're a good listener, my lad.....It's getting late and we are due at Lady Garth's. Yes.....I promised her I'd bring you in—She says everybody has been talking about you. Quite a lion, aren't you?.....and I believe in pleasing women—if it's no trouble.

"So we do at home," the other responded.

"I should say you did! By the way," Mr. Ventris lowered his musical voice and examined the tip of his cigarette, "You don't talk about the sex much, my young friend, and I've never asked you—lots of affairs in Philadelphia?"

Dick shrugged. "No. I've girl friends there of course. Not that I've written to them much because—well, this whole business is hard to explain."

"Pretty girls?"

"Of course."

"With lots of dollars?"



Dick stiffened. "How should I know? We've danced together—skated—played tennis—"

"I see. Not tied up to any of 'em, eh?"

"Not much! With only a clerkship in the Trust Company and not even started at that!"

The other looked at him, thinking, as more than once before during that week "Odd, but he simply won't accept the change!" while aloud he observed, "Just so. You've met two or three pretty ones here, haven't you? Lady Cecily, for example—how did she strike you?"

"You mean that young giantess with bales of hair, who didn't say anything except to ask me for a light? I thought she was larger than life-size—I prefer them drawn to scale myself."

Mr. Ventris had small taste for transatlantic humor. "She would be perfectly suitable—the Faulkners have money and there are some good pictures in the Dower house. We've got to think of Shank, you know.....'Course, there are others and by the next season you ought to be in a position to go regularly about. Still—it's never too early to think of Shank."

"For you, sir, I know it is not," Monkton answered, but Mr. Ventris did not even perceive the half irony under his young friend's affectionate smile.

"Lady Monkton will have some autumn house-parties—she knows many charmers who are—er—of the family's friends. I've noticed that our American cousins sometimes don't fall victims as quickly as we do—is that true?"

"Depends—but I guess it is," Dick answered

reflectively—"You seem to go in for being in love over here the way you go in for pictures and books—to add to your collections. You—er—specialize in it more."

"You think so? Well, perhaps we do." M. Charles smiled his secret smile. "Women, dear Diccon, are an exquisite pursuit; love is a delicate art, mysterious and alluring as Leonardo's—but more fleeting! All art, I agree, paints life with brilliant colors, but those of love are evanescent. However," he proceeded gently, his eyes resting on his ward with an odd gleam in their depths, "I myself have never given it close attention because I chose to devote my life to satisfactions more permanent." He purred. "In your country you allow for a change of taste, they tell me, by frequent divorces—very convenient that, eh?"

Richard was indignant.

"They do talk more rot about us!" he replied warmly. "We may make a hash of it at times, but we—that is, fellows I know—expect to get married and stay married. . . . . We look for a certain sort of girl, too, a girl with sense. . . . . Girls at home are perfectly splendid! . . . . . The only one I've seen at all in their class since I landed," was his unexpected conclusion, "is Miss Lang."

"Miss Lang!"

"Yes: there's a girl with energy and brains. I like to talk to her; she knows things. Why, at home we'd think her just the finest kind."

Mr. Ventris was looking at him.

"She is a most estimable young woman, and I



believe well-born," he remarked, and there was an icy chime in his voice; "but of course I wasn't considering that kind of a person."

"Why? Wasn't Lady Monkton herself that kind of a person?"

The question was so direct that M. Charles could only veil his discomfiture under a rare fit of laughter, which touched his face for the moment with an unpleasant expression. Soon, however, the jar passed, and he looked kindly on his ward again. But Dick, too, had been jarred.

People's minds are like houses: some are small and close, with dirty corners. Others are clean enough, but bare and comfortless, or cluttered with cheap, modern ideas. Those of us who have been admitted to the hospitality of some stately mind, firmly built, graciously colored, and filled with the stores which learning and taste have gathered together, shall not soon forget its spacious peace. The mind of M. Charles was a Gothic building, carved and strangely rich, but dimly lit, and with shadowy recesses. It was indeed fascinating, but one did not move easily about in it, and some of the rooms gave one a little disquiet. Dick had to remind himself of M. Charles' great, great kindness to keep from choking on a certain cynicism in the elder's attitude toward life. Strange, to find so devout a worshipper of art so scornful of the artificer!

Much of this opinion, of course, was held by an older and wearier society—one which had been too often deceived to have any illusion left regarding the duration of human affections.

Beside their impermanency, the Past appeared alone enduring in its visual and tactual remains. To preserve these seemed to such as Charles Ventris a task really worth while, perhaps the only task in life really worth while. The beauty and ease with which he surrounded his existence, were assumed as a means of maintaining it in the proper key. For such service the acolyte must live delicately. He hoped to teach his young friend this in time; meanwhile, he dealt with certain vague antagonisms, in a manner full of sweetness and patience. Dick felt this. One disapproved, at moments, of M. Charles, but one found him very loyable.



## CHAPTER XXI

### A GILT-HANDLED DAGGER

**B**ETWEEN Lincoln's Inn Fields and much antiquarian business, the days passed quickly. M. Charles was planning for his forthcoming sale, which centred about the Canticles and to which he intended adding other long-hoarded treasures of manuscript. These he showed to Dick, pulling them one by one from their cabinet, expatiating, explaining, admiring. These included several Books of Hour; Psalteria; Persian Tales and a Firdusi of an elaborate richness; Epistolæ S. Hierom, whose initials were entwined with grotesques; and a 15th century Froissart, containing pictures of kings and castles and battles, in a binding of gold-embroidered velvet.

"All these had better go," he said, "since they have been here long enough to have my *cachet* and the time may come, Diccon, when you and Shank will need me no longer?"

The other only shook his head at the half-sly look that slipped out with these words; for both made him uncomfortable.

The announcement that these beautiful things

were to be placed on exhibition, preparatory to a sale "from the famous collection of the distinguished palæographist Charles Ventris, Esq." gathered together, in short order, an audience of enthusiasts. By them M. Charles was immediately surrounded and swam in his element, both as expert authority and man of the world. If the great Canticles, blazing on its velvet throne like a crowned monarch, surrounded by a crowd of lesser lights as courtiers, seemed to Dick Monkton almost unbelievably beautiful—so M. Charles seemed almost unbelievably clever and informed. Nothing he did not know—nothing his ready smile and sparkling eyes could not make interesting. He fulfilled himself so utterly; he expanded so fully, that there were times when he seemed like a great actor, superbly acting himself. Did this mean that there were times when he seemed a trifle strained, artificial? Perhaps.

As for his friends and fellow collectors, Dick found their personalities rich and high flavored and their kindness great. They were gracious to Monkton of Shank. All of them seemed immersed in a deep well of the Past, out of which no one of them willingly lifted his head. One and all seemed to have Shank, as it were at their finger-tips. Mr. Porter Meesom crossed the room when Dick entered, to enquire interestedly into the state of the Genoa velvet chair coverings in the Green Gallery—he had been making researches into the life of 15th century textiles. Brymfield Hill was working up an article for



the "Connoisseur" on ornamental lead drain-heads.....and old Sir Peter Pyke, though he looked as blind as a bat, yet was presented to Dick as "a great Sir Joshua man" and went into growling raptures over his recollection of Lady Molly Monkton's silken scarf.....

Delightful to come in contact with this enthusiasm, to be in sympathy with it, to realize that one might be part of it, to feel the touch of M. Charles's hand—a caressing affectionate touch on one's arm and to hear him say—"My young friend, Sir Peter, is a very Monkton—he has the real love—you cannot deny that!" Yes: it was wonderful. If there had not been other moments—

One day as Dick sat reading, the butler came to tell him that Coles had arrived and wished a word with him. Mr. Ventriss was out; so there was nothing for it but assent, although Dick, when he gave this assent, was renewedly conscious of a distaste, not only for Coles, but for that whole question of identity which centred in this man's testimony. Vividly there returned to his mind that interview in Lincoln's Inn Fields when he had first seen this man and the woman McNeil. The picture rose up before him. He saw a very fat old woman, with white hair smoothed down on either side of her round face, wearing a new black shawl with a crease in it and new shiny boots. She wore a neat bonnet, and couldn't have looked more respectable if she had tried. She had steady eyes, fixed on Mr. Scrope and, as she talked and talked and talked,

she gave one the effect of listening carefully to what she was saying—evidently, she was no fool. Her fat hands lay in her lap and the fingers of her gloves stuck out limply. Her manner toward himself had been one of affectionate, if restrained deference. “I ’eld ’im in these h’arms!” she did declare pathetically, but only once was this note struck.....most of her narrative was unemotional, business-like.

He had noticed that she didn’t seem to show any special intimacy with her nephew-in-law. Coles, in fact, during McNeil’s examination, had sat a trifle sulkily, looking out of the window and shuffling his feet. He was a man of the rodent type, with projecting teeth; a thin man, a little bent: with vaguely hostile eyes. There are a great many men of his kind in the London streets. Before the War, they used to lurch out of public houses and sleep on park benches, and thrust their whining appeals into cab-windows at street corners. Since the War, they walk about more openly and a new note has come into their voices. Many have fought and fought bravely. They will fight again if they get the chance and they care not at all who it is they fight against. Coles was perfectly sober whenever Dick saw him, yet one was sure he was not always sober. . . . .he was frank—that at least was in favor. He was in this thing for money—he said so plainly—it was a good thing for him the day he had chanced on those letters!.....He had taken them to Charles Ventris first because Sir Lycett Monkton was not available. He made no parade



of honesty, he made no reference to non-existent respectability—but there was nothing definite against the man except that he had lived on his wife. The picture in Richard's mind prolonged itself until the subject of it was standing in the doorway, hat in hand and carrying his head, as he always did, a trifle on one side.

Then he nodded at the visitor, a little coldly. No: he did not like Coles, that was certain. He did not like Coles and he did not like McNeil, while in the bottom of his heart he a little wondered that the effect of their personalities seemed to count for so little in the minds of Mr. Ventriss and Sir John and Scrope. Dick thought McNeil confident and smirking, and he thought Coles furtive and insolent. Now, as the man tilted his head to look at him—although his voice and manner were respectful—Dick was freshly aware of this dislike.

"Mr. Ventriss being out, Sir Richard, I thought I might venture—? I'll take only a momink of your time."

"Yes—of course. What can I do for you?"

Coles advanced a step nearer, his head almost on his shoulder, and went on in his servile voice: "W'y, the fact is, Sir Richard, that Mrs. McNeil and me don't think we're being treated just right—if I may s'y so. When we was told to come forward, Sir Richard, with what we knew, we expected as we would be treated liberal. If it 'adn't been for us—and perticler for Mrs. McNeil—things wouldn't 'ave gone so smooth for you now, would they?"

“What do you mean?” Monkton asked and stared at him and something in the frank stare irritated Coles.

“Wot I mean is that a n’undred pounds ’ere and there isn’t anythink!” he said and Dick’s amazement increased at the bullying edge to his voice, “wot with taxes and all—it isn’t enough—that’s wot I mean.....I wouldn’t ’ave left my job and worked like I ’ave done for just a beggarly ’undred pound. Not in this kind of a case! McNeil and me we wants big money and we’ll not trail down to Lincoln’s Inn Fields and kick our ’eels in Mr. Scrope’s office unless we get it—to say nothink—”

“Coles! You here?” Mr. Ventriss stood in the doorway. He held his shining hat in his hand and his chin was up. His eyes looked beyond Dick and blazed upon Coles.

“How dare you intrude upon Sir Richard—in his own house?”

This intensity of voice and gaze was too much for Coles. He shuffled his feet and his tones dropped into a whine. “I was only tryin’ to tell Sir Richard, sir,—you wasn’t home—that I didn’t think—”

“You will come outside if you wish to talk to me.”

Mr. Ventriss held open the door in a concentrated white fury, which gave Dick a new and rather startling impression of his temper. The man hesitated, then slunk out. For awhile, there came a mutter of voices, then the heels of



Coles clattered down the stairs and silence followed.

Mr. Ventris re-entered the room, evidently still discomposed. His mouth twitched with anger, but he said nothing until he had lighted a soothing cigarette and flung himself down in his chair.

"The swine have such power to annoy one!" he burst out with a deprecating gesture and trying to smile—"he's a low brute—but one must expect it, I suppose.....no making of omelettes without breaking of eggs, my boy—I ought to be a philosopher.....What book's that, Dickon? May Sinclair's 'Divine Fire'? Ah yes; it's the only one of her novels any *man* would ever read.

"I wish we could get rid of Coles," Dick said troubled: "he lends the whole affair an atmosphere I hate—so underhand....."

"Oh, let's forget it.....! Do you see what I picked up today? What do you think of that?"

The dagger was an old one with a broad blade and a handle still showing gilt. On one side of the blade, Dick could make out the words, "Remember the murder of Sir Edmundbury Godfrey!" and on the other side the words, "Remember Religion!"

"An odd relic," Charles Ventris said—"Do you recall that famous mystery of 1678? These daggers were made and distributed in Godfrey's memory and this one with the gilt handle was sent, so tradition says, to the Duke of York. An ironical gift, as he was doubtless to blame for Godfrey's death."

"One could deal a good blow with it," Dick commented.

"And much better than modern ways of killing," the other went on, gently discoursing, "safer—tidier—The modern revolver is an uncertain thing at best."

"Not always, witness the man at Shank."

"Oh the burglar, you mean?"

"Are you sure he was that?"

Charles Ventris fastidiously shrugged.—"A very unsuccessful one evidently!"

"They never tried to find out anything more about it, did they? Don't you think the police dropped the enquiry remarkably soon?"

"What else could they do? The case was plain," responded M. Charles indifferently, and went on explaining the relic which he held in his hand.

"But aren't you curious to know who killed him? After all, it was somebody, who knew Shank—how to get in and out again. Doesn't that ever worry you, sir?"

M. Charles abstractedly shook his head. Apparently the question didn't worry him. But it continued to run in his companion's thoughts, as his next words showed.

"I said the same thing to the gentleman we dined with the other evening.....that one who was somebody at Scotland Yard and he said—"

"Yes?" M. Charles looked up at Dick with the first interest he had showed.

"—He said that often when the police apparently dropped an investigation, it only meant they



were working at it from another angle in their own way."

"Quite so. He would use an official shibboleth whenever he could—that's just like Sir Edward. He can't hide the brainless ineptitude of his whole crew by any means.....But I must be going on to Maggs's, about the catalogue..... where are you off to, Diccon—?"

"To the Museum, sir. There were a number of things I didn't get round to t'other day."

"A good idea!" M. Charles's face was lit with gratification, as it always was at any and every indication which Dick showed of "learning his job." After the young man left him, he remained until the end of his smoke seated in his chair and apparently interrogating the mystery of Bellini's Sixth Allegory. Then he arose and went to his desk, where he made a series of calculations in pounds, shillings and pence, which faced him with the unsatisfactory totals which such things are wont to display. M. Charles wrinkled his white forehead.....

Appalling—the sums of money which it took to live like a gentleman! Time was, when his salary as curator of Shank had been well-nigh sufficient in itself—and what was it now? One had to have a car—but since the War he had added no important items to his own collections. In fact, he had felt decidedly injured at being obliged to forego bidding for that Chinese garden, which was just what he needed to balance the one in the corner over there. Well, it was a

time to sell rather than to buy—let the Americans do the latter!

M. Charles glanced once more down the list of figures made out so clearly in his decorative script. There were three items in particular set after three names, whose total equalled almost all the rest added together.....The sight of them roused him to a renewed sense of indignation and he tore the sheet into fine strips and threw them away. Then he wandered to the window and looked into the street. Yes: undoubtedly, that was the same man lounging across the way, he had noticed when he came in an hour ago, and when he went out yesterday... ..M. Charles moved away from the window, again with his fastidious shrug.....

Richard meanwhile, strode the pavement of St. James's with all the gayety of youth, reflecting the gayety of London and summer. At home were long rows of shuttered houses, baking sidewalks, white flames of chimney-smoke wavering in the hot breeze, leaves already crisped yellow, faces already wan with heat. Here, window-boxes bloomed with flowers and omnibuses with bright-colored frocks; couples went walking in the Parks and during the delightful, dilatory twilights the day of pleasuring seemed to draw to a close with smiles.

Of course, there was another side to this of which Dick knew nothing as yet: there was January as well as July. That month in his home meant skies of frozen turquoise and diamond sunshine looking upon white roadways and jingling



sleigh-bells; it meant log-fires generously piled. Here, it meant choking fog without, stuffy chilliness within—but who recalled January in July? Not Dick.

Everything pleased him as he strode northward, even his hat. This hat had been a gift pressed upon him on the day when M. Charles heard his innocent remark that he “guessed it was growing hot enough for a straw!” Dick’s puzzled protest at the grey felt had been met with the answer that “one couldn’t look like a look like what he very nearly had been—nor why Sir John Flippin had ejaculated “God bless my soul, ’course not!” as if Dick had proposed to call at Buckingham Palace in his pajamas. . . . . Today, the grey hat was even as other hats worn by smiling youth like himself; he cocked it a little as he walked.

M. Charles, of course, had a near and dear crony in the innermost recesses of the British Museum—who turned out to be bushy, spectacled, blunt and delightful. He welcomed Monkton of Shank with enthusiasm no less real because it only twinkled behind his heavy lenses and he opened sacred doors for Dick and showed him unforgettable things. Hours moved on; it was growing late when the Reading Room was reached, so an acolyte was summoned and placed at Dick’s disposal, while the chief functionary withdrew and as it chanced, just in time.

Richard had hesitated for a moment, because there was so much he wanted to look at. Should it be the Lindisfarne Gospels or the Bedford

Hours? or the Charters of Edgar and Henry, to whose golden lettering M. Charles had referred in terms almost lyrical? While still in this embarrassment of choice, his eye chanced upon a bent head, at a desk in a corner,—a head as black as an India-ink initial or Caxton's type—which could belong to no other person than Miss Jean Lang.



## CHAPTER XXII

### MOUNTING THE CENTAUR

**A**FTER all, the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Bedford Hours could wait..... Dick found himself in another instant standing by the desk and meeting Jean's startled look by an outstretched hand.

Miss Lang wore her little best dress and had put a wreath of bright flowers around the hat which she hung on her chair. Several volumes lay in front of her, of which two were in manuscript. The book she was reading when he spoke to her was entitled—a good deal to his surprise—“Life and Works of Constantine Simonides.” When she saw who it was she said “Why—er—how do you do?” in a manner that was a trifle constrained. But young Monkton never saw the constraint: he was openly delighted. Something had been wanting to the day and now it was supplied.....

“What are you doing here?” he asked her, “and when did you come to London?”

“I'm only in town for the day,” she told him,

"I had something to look up. . . . . I go back this evening."

She closed the book he was about to take out of her grasp and laid it down, keeping her hand still upon it; her face wore a sober expression.

"It's a wonderful day you know—aren't you nearly finished? Surely you'll be wanting your tea soon," the young man said. "Let's have a walk and get some—I'm tired of books and things. . . . . and you're *certain* to be wanting your tea!"

A little laugh danced into Jean's eyes for a moment and out again.

"So you think we're always thinking of our tea? But I don't know—" she spoke with hesitation but he felt that she leaned toward the idea and so he pressed it.

"Really it's too lovely a summer day to spend all indoors. And take pity on me—I've nobody to play with of my own age—Come along—just once!"

There was no doubt that he was handsome and friendly and jolly. The girl felt suddenly that pull of youth to youth. After all—why not?

The acolyte, hovering in the background, was disgusted to find that Sir Richard did not ask either for the Bedford Hours or for the Charters of Edgar and Henry. On the contrary, he waited until Miss Lang had returned her books and put on her hat and the two fared gaily forth together from the Reading Room, into the broad world.

"Why on earth were you reading about



Constantine Simonides?" Dick asked, as they walked through vast halls, where monstrous gods stared down at them.

"Why do you ask?" she parried.

"Because—why, wasn't he the notorious forger of antiques?"

"Precisely. They hardly know what he did forge—maybe the Codex he claimed to have found near Mount Sinai."

"I remember. But that makes me think of something else. Did you ever examine the olive-tree in the Canticles, as you said you would?"

She answered quietly, but not in a tone of great interest, "Oh yes; very carefully."

"And it was what you thought?"

"Very much as I thought," she echoed and waited for a further questioning. But her companion seemed satisfied and ready, as she was, to think about something else. As he had said, it was too pleasant a day to bury oneself in dusty old manuscripts. He did remark, with a half rueful smile:

"Well I'm glad you kept me from making an ass of myself before M. Charles. Dear M. Charles, he would have laughed at me—and yet you know, I've often thought it was a remarkably funny thing after all."

She answered steadily, "Yes; it is decidedly odd."

By this time they came down the steps into the courtyard. Sunshine lingered there: but there are gayer quarters of London than Bloomsbury.

The two set their faces westward. Before beginning their talk—

"I hear I'm to congratulate you, Sir Richard," Miss Lang proffered, with an air quaintly formal. "We only guessed—we at Shank—for a long time. Then the other day we heard about McNeil and her testimony and so on. Lady Monkton told me it was practically settled that you are the heir—it's wonderful!"

"Oh, don't let's talk about any of that today!" he irresistibly cried and then, meeting her surprise—"of course, it's wonderful if it's true—and of course I'm the luckiest chap—but you know, Miss Lang, I can't make up my mind whether I really am or not and I get sick of thinking about it! Then, too—ever since you spoke of that poor little, first Lady Monkton—the subject makes me wince. I can't help it!"

Jean was silent.

"Of course if I had stopped to think I should never—" she began after a pause, but Dick broke in with vehemence:

"'Twasn't your fault—I was bound to hear it sooner or later. 'Tis common gossip, I know that now—But I can't realize yet what it all means. Though everyone is so kind, I'm still an outlander. I don't fit in. Then—my father—how can I change my way of thinking about him? He and I were such friends!"

These feelings had been long pent up and were eagerly poured out. Jean felt keenly understanding and sympathetic: her reserve melted, the face



she turned toward him quivered beautifully and she met him with the same note.

"I know: so was I with mine."

"The War came and changed everything."

"Didn't it, just? . . . . . We simply couldn't live on Dad's salary and his royalties shrank to nothing and all Mother had was in the Antwerp water-works—"

"And when did he go?"

"In the summer of 1918. He never knew the victory."

"Mine died that fall, too—while I was still in France."

Both fell silent for a moment, but the web of sympathy had been strangely spun so that the pause held already a quality of intimacy.

Astonishing—had one paused to analyze it—how much more at ease he found himself with Jean than with anyone else he had met in England. No reserves, no queries; one could let oneself go, one need not translate. The Scots must be more like the Americans, or was it the girl herself?—frank, independent, straightforward, and liking her job. He fell to telling her about that past boyhood of his, pouring it all out with transatlantic fluency and vividness of speech.

She was quick to respond, and, when he looked at her, there was a real interest in her face. He liked it, as he liked it when she said "Ay," forgetting her English. He felt as if he had entered into a warm and pleasant house to rest: nothing

stately, nothing magnificent or picturesque in that dwelling-place, but it reminded him of home.

"Yes: Edinburgh was rather like *that*. At first I did war-work like everybody else, of course, but that worried Dad because I'd acted as his secretary and been fairly well-trained. So, when he died, I came to Shank. One must be up and doing, surely."

"When one is your kind, one must."

"Ah, I ought to have been a lad—I know it—but do ye think I'm too boyish?"

"I think you're very feminine."

This was satisfactory indeed.....

".....The trouble is with me.....I'm reserved, I think.....I love all those things Mr. Ventris loves.....but not *as* he loves them."

Hot from Jean came "Of course not *as* he loves them! My soul, M. Charles is not natural! That is—" she qualified hastily, "not natural for our day. His personality would be perfectly natural for the sixteenth century.....That's what he is with his passion for perfect things, he's a Renaissance person."

Dick looked down at her in gratitude and wonder at her penetration.

"That's it exactly! And I'm not; I'm of today, and sometimes I fear that he may be disappointed. He's been so good to me and so has Lady Monkton."

"I wouldn't fret," she consoled him. "He'll trust you because you're trustworthy. I don't think M. Charles has many trustworthy people around him. The time may come when 'twill



mean more to him to have your affection than he thinks, more even than to have you at Shank."

"Do you think so?" he asked, a shade doubtfully.

"Ay, I'm sure of it. He's tired often, is M. Charles. And mere things betray one sometimes."

"It's bully that you understand the way you do!"

Probably there were other people in Oxford Street—there generally were—but one had a curious sense of having the place to oneself. They walked and walked and walked, and, after the shortest mile and half in London, came upon the Park.....Somewhere in that region they tea'd, a tea with strawberries and cake—Jean poured it out with her deft, long hands. By this time they had reached the topic of her remarkable difference from everybody else, a very important topic: one that had to be settled because the time was growing short and there were others equally important yet to discuss, concerning their ideas regarding marriage and married life.

"With *us*, we believe in being best friends; we work together—that's what my Father and Mother did anyway—"

"I've always heard American men were splendid."

"Women are more important than men are, *we* think. And they ought to have a life of their own. Look at you—you amount to more because you know things and work—"

"Oh I don't know about that—"

"I'm sure of it."

His certainty was such a comfort.....

".....In England they seem to consider everything in marriage except the companionship. Poms and vanities and family and money. Well, I'm not going to be like that anyway."

Miss Lang was in her way a woman of the world and she heard this assertion with doubt which must be loyally expressed.

"You may find you can't help it, Sir Richard, now mayn't you? There's Shank!"

"Oh, damn Shank!"

"Goodness gracious!" she smiled, but she did turn just a little pale. Monstrous heresy! And yet she drew courage from it for him. If he could damn Shank the future was not wholly lost.....

"But I don't agree with you—I can't, you see." Jean was brave and never braver than at this moment—"Those things *do* count: they must. People of the same class have similar ideas of duty, if nothing else. They understand the responsibilities of rank and wealth. It *must* be better—they can rely more on each other: there's less strain. I've known cases of the other kind that were awfully unsuccessful."

"Maybe. But I like our way best."

"Of course you do."

"It's a wonderful country. You'd simply love it, Miss Lang. You're rather like an American



girl, I think." His tone implied the enormous height of this compliment, which, as Miss Jean Lang was a Scot and therefore prouder than anything on earth, would under ordinary circumstances have been disclaimed by her with prompt assertion of her nationality. But for some reason she forgot to make it: she merely looked at her companion and felt flattered.

"Perhaps," she ventured, "after all, you will be marrying an American young lady?"

"Perhaps I shall."

Tea could not be further prolonged without the danger of becoming dinner. Moreover Jean's train was due to start before many minutes. There was time only to walk down Park Lane and take a taxi at Hyde Park Corner and still it seemed as if there was a great deal left to say. They talked and talked: and when Monkton, his eyes fixed on his companion's face, cannoned into a green bench, his clumsiness seemed the natural effect of this highly important conference.

The antics of a passing Pekinese sent both of them into laughter, as though it were a novel and original jest. And the world outside their path, though it rolled on as usual with trucks and omnibuses and motor-cars roaring by bearing their freight of human hope and weight of human disappointment, ceased for Dick and Jean to have any reality.....

At Stanhope Gate a hurdy-gurdy was drawn up, with the man industriously grinding out some stale ditty.

Jean Lang smiled scornfully. "Such a worn-out tune!" she sniffed, "Wouldn't you think they'd be getting something new by this time? I heard that during the War.....such an old tune!"



## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE BRIDAL DRESS

**T**HE windows of the Scriptorium faced eastward upon the Triton Court, and were first in all the sleeping house to catch the glitter of the rising sun. When the long shadows ran across the grass, the rays closely followed, touching purple-brown stonework, gilding tall weather-vanes, and then, entering many paned windows, lit the far corners of its bare interior.

Scarcely had they done so one August morning, when the door quietly opened to admit the genius of the place, who, as quietly, closed it behind her. Notwithstanding the early hour, Miss Lang was dressed in her customary business-like working frock and apron and carried an armful of books. Her manner, though by no means hurried, was concentrated and swift.

Under the window ran a long trestle table on which had been placed a pair of oaken lecterns, the kind so often seen in medieval pictures. On each of these she deposited one of the volumes she carried, which were taken from the collection downstairs. When they were set side by side

under the strong light, Jean took out her millimeter rule, callipers and magnifier, and started to examine each volume page by page. She worked steadily, surely, occasionally pausing and returning on her own track to pass from one manuscript to the other, in a manner indicating her study to be comparative. From her absorption it was evident that such work was familiar to her. She had no time for admiration but the pages, as she turned them, blossomed beneath her hands like little parterres of flowers.....

The morning moved on, marked by the sundial hanging below the king's cypher and above the gate-way. Now the Triton on the fountain caught the sunlight on his horn and seemed to blow it manfully. Still the Great House slept on, in secure and indolent beauty.....

When, after some hours, Jean lifted her eyes it was with a sigh of perplexity. Plainly, her work was fruitless.....She sat for a few minutes, head in hands and biting her underlip: then she unlocked a cupboard, took something therefrom and went back to the table. What she now held was an old piece of soiled parchment—no less in truth than the identical piece of parchment found lying beside the dead Paul Stern in the crypt of Shank, more than a month ago..... Holding this sheet in her left hand, she began to turn the pages of the volume lying nearest, comparing the two with her magnifier and going back and forth so that she might look upon the surface on both the rough and the smooth side. Although she carried on this investigation with



patient care, it yielded no more than the first had done. She rose, wandered nearer to the window and stood looking out.....

By and by Dolly Gapper, fresh and active in her print frock, came out of the Gate-house over which she and her father lived; and with some creaking and groaning, the huge doors were drawn back. Lady Monkton's terrier ran sniffing round the court until Dolly called him in. Silence and sunshine flooded the quadrangle. Then a man appeared in the gateway, looked about him a trifle uneasily and drew what proved to be a key from his pocket. With this he admitted himself into the house by a small door leading, as Jean knew, into the passage where the rooms of men-servants had been in the old days. His disappearance left the quadrangle empty, as it had been before; but the secretary had seen who it was. With no little astonishment she recognized the man as a person named Coles, of whom she knew only that he was the nephew of the old woman on whose testimony the Claimant chiefly relied to prove his identity. One couldn't mistake him; he carried his head oddly tilted on one side. That this man should have a key was sufficiently remarkable.....Certainly, this was an unsatisfactory and a perplexing morning.....the watcher at the window turned back into the room. Another and far different task awaited her.....

From a corner of the cupboard, Jean drew forth a large box, full of letters, papers and miscellany of all sorts sorted into bundles and at

these she proceeded to glance rapidly and systematically. Some of the bundles proved to be receipted bills of old date or business papers of the minor kind relating to the estate. Among the loose papers were a mass of ancient menus, pamphlets and programmes. At the bottom of the box she found some faded photographs, costumed in the dress of the '80s and '90s, wearing that wistful and apologetic expression peculiar to old photographs. One of these, the largest, was a group of figures standing on the steps of what might be a church. Jean studied this with interest and with the first approach to a smile which her weary young face had worn that morning. She laid it aside, replaced the papers in the box and the box in the cupboard. By her watch, it was after eight when she left the Scriptorium with the volumes which she had taken from the Manuscript Room.

The housemaids were finishing their work as Miss Lang descended to the lower storey. She replaced the manuscripts, locked the cases and restored the keys as usual to Mr. Ventris's desk. Then she ascended to her own room that she might make herself tidy for breakfast. In the passage she met the Curator himself, whose morning greeting was courteous but a trifle more abstracted than usual. He was biting his lips and she thought he seemed annoyed. Once in her own room, she again examined the photograph she had found in the box. Would it please Sir Richard? she thought, then very stern with herself, what matter if it did please Sir Richard?

But after all, why did it hurt to be friends with



Sir Richard when it was so plain he wanted to be friends? He was just a stranger, a boy of her own age. His manner could not have been more comradely, more free from any self-consciousness. What earthly harm could it do to talk with him occasionally? Certainly, Jean had made no overtures—she had tried to avoid him; her behavior had been most distant, Lady Monkton must have approved it. Ever since his return to Shank they had had no more than a passing word. More than once, Jean had seen that he wanted a chat, but she had gone promptly about her business.....

Now, there was this photograph to show him, the poor lad! Were they to be keeping him like a monk in a cloister, and he Monkton of Shank? She found herself growing quite indignant, which made it much easier to lay a deliberate scheme to meet him the first chance that presented itself.....She owed it to him, she agreed, and she was tired of prudence and caution. The young so often are.

All that day, going quietly about her work, she watched her opportunity and was quick to take it when it came. Her encounter with young Monkton in the later hours of the afternoon was the result of careful planning. The details and feverish necessity of this plan clamored in Jean's ears and drowned out the smaller voices of prudence.

The two met, smiling; eyes on joyful eyes. Dick fell into step beside the girl, elated, refreshed, breathing a natural air. At once there

flowed between them that current of unfettered and intimate talk as between friends having a background in common. Talk with his hosts at Shank had ever an element of strain for Dick unless he maintained himself in the position of pupil. Winning as was Lady Monkton's exotic charm; deep as was Dick's respect for M. Charles and his store of knowledge—their outlook had been upon different worlds. Youth, actively pursuing congenial work was more familiar to Richard than this finished and fastidious maturity, which accepted life as a right.

The long village street stretched out toward the fields and the August sun. These two sped on absorbed, far too absorbed in one another to see that a lounge against an opposite "pub" suddenly straightened up at their passing and looked after with a show of interest that deepened into a grin. This man was Hays, the butler, a person who knew that he had every reason to fear and to dislike the observant Miss Lang. He gazed for a moment after the disappearing pair and then walked rapidly back toward the gates of the Great House. His manner was purposeful.

Crossing a thread of brook by a stone bridge, the street became a high road and wandered between hedges into the pleasant countryside. From this bridge the view of Shank was famous. Ruskin had sketched it; Constable had painted it; Turner had clothed it in the shimmering tissues of sunset. Here instinctively, one paused to look upon that mass of buildings dominating



its hill-side and lifting a crenellated and towered roof-line against the pale sky.

"Look at it!" Dick cried, awe-stricken, "it looms over everything.....today it's stately and smiling.....tomorrow it may be terrible like a prison.....Always, it is the only thing one is able to see."

"Are you finding it any easier to believe," asked his companion quietly, "that it is your heritage?" Her voice held a strange note and he looked anxiously at her non-committal face.

"No: I can't say that. Perhaps I'm more used to it. I've heard McNeil tell her story more than once and certainly the evidence seems very strong."

"By the way," Miss Lang said, "I chanced on something which may interest you. Here it is," and she held the picture toward him. "It's Sir Piers' wedding-party—can you see?"

The group was still fairly clear and showed a number of persons standing on the steps of a church. In the centre was the tall figure of Sir Piers Monkton; behind him his slighter friend the Curator. By his side, stood a smiling slender young girl, wearing a furbelowed cloak and a hat with a sweeping plume. There was a clergyman; an elderly lady in a bustle, and other figures around them. On the back was written, "Wedding of Sir Piers Monkton and Miss Lucy Vignoles, June 1895."

"That must be Mr. Ventriss as the best man," Jean pointed out, "How young he looks! But what's the matter?"

Richard did not seem to hear: he was holding the picture between his hands, studying it with a frown.

"Matter?" he repeated abstractedly, "that's it—what's the matter?"

"I don't understand—what puzzles you?"

"*Everything* puzzles me!" he waved her to a seat beside him on the stone parapet, "Look, Miss Lang. That's she—my—my mother—isn't it? standing beside Sir Piers? You see how she's dressed? Well, when McNeil described the wedding, she spoke about the bride in her white dress and veil, 'I put her long veil over her myself,' said she, 'the poor young thing!'"

"Then this was taken afterwards," Jean promptly assured him—"she changed into her going-away frock."

He pointed to the door in the background.

"That's the church where they were married all right..... I've been there with M. Charles in the car. It's three miles or more from the house. She was married from her aunt's place, Fallowleas: she wouldn't change her dress at the church, you know."

"Probably they all went back there to have the picture taken," said Jean, though she did not believe it, "or else McNeil has forgotten....."

He clapped his hands with emphasis upon the parapet. "That's it—McNeil *can't* have forgotten a thing like that.....it's not the sort of thing one forgets. You know yourself you could never forget how the bride was dressed..... And she remembered absolutely everything—



details as clear as you please. She kept repeating, 'It was me put the veil over her face—the poor young lady!' ”

“But Mr. Ventriss would know if she were wrong,” Jean argued, “what did he say?”

“Nothing—to that. . . . . No, as I recall, I don't think he was in the room the first time I heard McNeil tell about the wedding. But he picked her up sharply on one or two points..”

“Men don't recall such things—not as women do. He may not have thought—”

“All the same—it worries me—it makes me doubtful again. . . . . if we had only a witness other than this pair! Somehow I—” He choked on his perplexity and his sentence ended in a shake of the head. She longed to help him.

“Listen, Sir Richard. . . . . I have a suggestion . . . . .” Jean spoke in that comradely way and Dick rested his own miserable eyes upon the clear frankness of her's: “I never told you, but my old nurse in Scotland was once in service at Shank. . . . . It ended badly for her: some quarrel and she had to leave. . . . . she never talks about it if she can help. But I'm sure she'd do anything for me—she's devoted to me. Of course she was not at the wedding—I know it wasn't until after the wedding that she came to Shank. But she heard it talked about no doubt. . . . . details of dress are just the sort of thing which stick in servant's minds. Suppose I write and ask her?”

His face lightened. “Why, she may have known this Mary McNeil. . . . . why couldn't

they meet and—?” But Jean shook her head, “She’s been ill, poor Biddy—she’s not been strong either.....and knowing how she felt about Shank, I wouldn’t want to betray her confidence. I thought of her at once, Sir Richard.....but there is no need for her to identify McNeil, remember—Lady Monkton and Mr. Ventriss have done that.”

He nodded, seeing the force of her remark but still dissatisfied.

“Her memory will give us the facts from another angle and that may be of use. I’ll write anyway, this evening.”

He thanked her, intensely. “You’re splendid—you’re a real friend.....you are the only person who seems to understand how I feel..... You see, it’s such an incredible business and M. Charles is so utterly sure. He won’t hear of any doubts.....he believes McNeil, the letter and everything in a way that I *can’t* seem to, myself. I don’t know why.....” his voice ran on shakily, “if it wasn’t for you, I don’t know how I could even bear the suspense—”

They were standing against the bridge, above the green meadow and small stream, facing the slope which rose to where all the windows of Shank glittered and shone. The warm intimacy of Dick’s tone embarrassed Jean: she could only say stiffly:

“Oh, it’s just trifling—nothing at all.”

“It’s just *everything*—to me,” said the young man, and in the shock of a conviction their eyes met. Troubled was this glance on both sides;



through the girl's parted lips the breath came stormily. What she saw in the young face bent above her was all that she had dreaded and longed to see; what she showed to him in her passionate eyes was all she had dreaded and longed to show. The Great House which towered over against them seemed to sink like an exhalation, its malign glory was lost in the little, homely vision which shone before them both.

Almost without knowing it, hand touched hand, and that link lasted for an eternal moment of anguish, bewilderment, and joy. But it was like Jean that she broke away from it; that she turned and ran, ran from the bridge.

She heard her name called after her, but she did not look back.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE MARY CASKET

**T**HE Scots are proud as well as romantic; Jean was both. She knew what such a glance meant, she knew moreover what it did not mean. No girl of her type could have gone about the world of after-War license without encountering facile passions, quickly inflamed and dying out as quickly. Jean had all the dread and distrust of them which comes from having lived in a home where trifling with the issues of life was held impossible, where emotion was deep and enduring.

Her childhood had not been unlike Dick's, for there had been the same retirement and simplicity, the same background of books. Years had been spent passing from the shadows of Edinbro' to the sunshine of Italy. Her father loved both countries, the place where he collected material and that wherein he welded it into memorable forms. His books, particularly his "Scotland in the Renaissance" had been read by many people for color and grace as well as for learning. His companionship had trained



Jean's mind and stimulated her imagination ever since she could remember, thus deepening the hold Shank had on her. Her parents' marriage had been entirely planted in love and congeniality of taste; she had grown up in happiness, recalling no sorrow, except, perhaps, the picture of a little brother with big eyes, who had died a long while ago. With such an inheritance, under such fostering, Jean was not inclined to look upon such things trivially. With a twisted smile, she shook her young head, recalling her father's word: "When your moment strikes, child, it's like to go hard with you!"

Yes: it was like to go hard indeed.....

Jean had not lived for two months under the same roof as Richard Monkton without seeing that such ideals were in his background also and sprung from the same soil as her own. This was not an idle flirtation; she could have therefore not even the consolation of indignation. Deeply she felt that this was a serious matter. From the first, Dick had been more at ease in her company. The circumstance should have warned her, yet it had not done so.....

And now? There seemed no question as to her responsibility, none at all. All day she carried her trouble about with her, from the Scriptorium to the Oak Parlor, from the Great Hall to the Rubens Gallery; for she had much to show Mr. Ventris. All day she tried to shut out that long, long look of anguish and joy, while she hurried on many tasks, took dictation, made lists, wrote directions, sent telephone messages.

Sometimes she underwent a wave of bitterness. Was it thus that life's great miracle was to come to her? only in this ugly mask, behind which she must not look? Once she caught herself staring at her employer with incredulity and wonder. *She* had not hesitated, it seemed (was rumor true), to go where her heart dictated, even though she trod on a cruel pathway! How could she? And all the while Jean knew that the woman with the narrow eyes, and lip lifted in a strange smile, would not be tender to her secretary because of her own past. In that house, Jean knew she could count on little but ruthlessness. If her employers merely dreamed of what had passed—then her faithful work of these last three years would stand for nothing.

Meanwhile, she loved Richard: she loved Monkton of Shank. . . . . He was sensitive, kind, intelligent, trustworthy—she was proud of him; she was proud of loving him. . . . . she was proud with a deep-seated and sustaining pride that the man she loved must seek her as her father's daughter should be sought. This pride meant instant withdrawal from the position she now held. The more she realized her feeling, the stronger became that determination. Monkton of Shank might seek Jean Lang if he would: Jean Lang was not going to seek Monkton of Shank. And yet how was this to be accomplished?

All that hot day, while the deer huddled together in the shade, and heavy scents from the garden came with the murmur of bees, Jean went to and fro with her painful problem. Of Richard



she was steadfastly careful to see nothing, although her heart went out to him, when he passed her, tall and white-faced, with eyes bearing the same clouds and lightnings as her own eyes. Once he climbed up to the door of the Scriptorium and knocked, hesitating—and Jean heard him, quivering with joy. But she had locked the door, and was careful to make no sound; after a time his steps went away dejected and when Jean raised her head again, her cheeks were wet.

During her leisure hour before tea, she wrote a letter.....

“Oh Mother darling:” (so Jean wrote) “Yes—I’m a wicked child that I have let slip a whole fortnight.....No: I’m not sick; yes, I’m all right—no, I’ve not forgotten! Things have been mixed and work heavy and that is all. No, I’ve not as yet any prospect of a holiday; but I shall ask for one when I see the opportunity and you shall see Jeanie almost before you know it. Yes: my heart is sair, darling, for home and you.....

“I rejoice that Biddy at last is on the turn; you must have had an anxious time.....And by the way, does she still hate to talk of Shank? Because you must find out something from her if you can—yes, even if she hates it—and tell her it’s for my sake, for Jeanie’s sake. I’m sure she can’t refuse you! I want you, darling, to get from her all she knows, or remembers, about Sir Piers and his first wife and their wedding. I know she came to Shank after that time; but servants will be telling about weddings and she

must have heard a lot of chat and gossip here and there. All that has grown very important, (how and why I will explain later,) and if I don't find out from Biddy what she knows, some harsher body may..... Particularly, Mother, ask her if she heard how the bride was *dressed*, what sort of gown and veil she had; who attended her; if she had a maid named McNeil and what she was like—all you can! I can't tell you how important it all is..... Pat Sir Gibbie on his nice collie head—and oh! is my lavender bed still blooming?

“Your Jean.”

The letter somehow comforted her and gave her poise for the conversation with Lady Monkton, which took place the next morning in a manner characteristic of both.

The secretary's approach was direct, quiet and regretful. She had been considering her resignation for some time past, she said. Her mother had had an unusual load of care from illness and ought not to be left so much alone. Jean should not be at such a distance—it was hardly right. Moreover, changes were impending at Shank, and therefore the moment was propitious. Of course Lady Monkton knew that she might count on Jean's help in training a successor.....

The elder woman heard her out with eyes cast down. She showed none of the vexation which might have been expected. Jean well knew that it would not be easy to find anyone to do what she had done with such enthusiasm, for the same



poor pay. It was the place and the work, not the money, which had repaid Miss Lang.

When Jean made an end, the other did ask with a little curiosity: "But you—what are you going to do? Have you any plans? Or perhaps it is no longer necessary—?"

And Jean was ready with an answer: "I can get work in Edinbro'—nearer home, my lady. Friends of my father have offered it to me before now, you see, only I loved Shank."

"Ah, I recall that your father was a distinguished scholar—" Lady Monkton observed, turning in her long chair and drawing her scarf about her. She asked nothing more and the interview terminated.

Some time later Denise went down to the terrace and soon M. Charles joined her there. They strolled about the garden paths together, these two tall figures, in earnest conversation. Lady Monkton's white hair under a white veil, the straight nun-like folds of her dress gave her yet more strikingly that Mary Stuart look.....la Veuve Blanche.

Always, M. Charles bent his fine head toward her, absorbed in her. Sir Richard, seeing them pass thus afar off was conscious of an indignant and puzzled compassion: "Hell!" was his disgusted comment to himself, "Why don't they get married?" and he recalled Sir John Flippin's phrase, "*un liaison sacré*." Surely, in Dick's opinion, this was a perverted world!.....

Meanwhile, Jean was glad that the affair was settled although her heart was heavy. Per-

haps it was the sultry weather that made her so restless, and by evening this feeling had grown too poignant for any chance of sleep. She bethought her of her box, which as there was no suitable place in her bed-room for it, had been stored away in an empty chamber at the end of the corridor. To go over her clothes and sort her belongings was a mechanical task which might quiet her nerves. She rose from bed; slipped on her dressing-gown and took her keys and a candle.

The night was airless, so that even in the long passage the flame did not waver. It was after eleven o'clock, and the whole great building seemed perfectly still. From without, the gentle patter of water-drops from the fountain came to her ears as she pushed open the door of the box-room.....

There were quite a number of winter clothes in the trunk which Jean had stored away during the warm weather.....Some of them needed attention so, she laid them aside. Then she decided that she might want ere long a certain knitted sweater, but this she did not find where she remembered placing it. She lifted out the tray and on her knees, plunged into the bottom of the trunk. There her fingers encountered the familiar knitted garment before her eyes saw it. She tried to pull it out, but it resisted. Apparently it was wrapped about a heavy object.....As she lifted this object out of the trunk and unwrapped it, Jean told herself it was odd that she should



have used it in this way, yet have no trace of recollection that she had done so.....

Then she saw...She knelt there holding what she had found and with every particle of color stricken from her face. One glance had been enough to tell her what it was.....

What she held in her shaking hands was a gold casket about a foot long and eight or nine inches high. It was carved all over in high relief in the wildest luxuriance of decorative fancy with garlands and grotesques, inlaid on the sides with plaques of brilliant enamel and heavily set with diamonds. Not only was its value that of precious materials and elaborate works of art but its historical association had made it one of the most famous treasures of Shank. It was, in fact, none other than the Mary Casket, which as Jean knew very well, should have been at that moment reposing on its velvet bed in its especial vitrine of the State Drawing-Room under lock and key.

The Mary Casket had been originally given to Anne Boleyn as a wedding-present, by an Italian prince who had ordered it from a young goldsmith named Benvenuto Cellini. Not four years later, that poor lady placed within it a last desperate appeal for mercy and sent them both to the king her husband. Henry, while disregarding the appeal, had carefully retained the valuable casket and in time his daughter Mary selected it in her turn as a wedding-gift to the young Queen of Scotland when she married the Dauphin of France. By a strange whim of Destiny, Mary Queen of Scots had used this same casket thirty

years later, to convey her own plea for life to Elizabeth, and Elizabeth, whether consciously or unconsciously, had followed her father's example. Tragedy encrusts the jewels of the Renaissance and such works of Cellini as remain to us are crystallized in blood and violence. The article which Jean discovered in her trunk had gone to placate two English sovereigns, had held two dreadful pleas for life, and was probably the most widely known of all the possessions of the Shank collection. The subject of a special illustrated monograph, it was the thing which tourists most eagerly asked to see. Lately, offers to buy it, at almost any price, had been coming in from all quarters of the globe. Jean remembered, with a sort of nauseating clarity, that she herself had personally received a fabulous offer from New York, with a thoughtful postscript suggesting that her own commission for negotiating the sale "on the quiet", would amount to a handsome sum. She had shown the letter at once to Lady Monkton and then indignantly put it in the fire.....

And this—*this* was in her trunk!

There was a pure, ingenious devilishness about the thing which turned the girl shaky and sick. The offer of two months ago had been made privately to *her*. She alone of all the household had access to the Mary Casket. She had that day somewhat abruptly resigned her position..... What deadly enemy sought to destroy her, and was it too late to save herself?

After a while, her sickness passed. She wiped



the sweat from her brow and hands. She began to think. . . . . She must creep noiselessly down to the drawing-room and at once replace the horrible thing. . . . . but after that? The possibilities of an enmity so deep and resourceful striking at her out of the dark—these were infinite. How combat—how prepare against them? There seemed no way.

She replaced the clothes in her trunk, locked it and silently returned to her own room. There, as Jean pushed open the door, her mind darting hither and yon in its search for aid, she suddenly remembered something—the Princess's Nut. In her writing-case was Mrs. Byrd's unopened letter.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE CHARRED PIECES

THE news next morning came first to old Laking the housekeeper in her room and upset her a good deal. One of the under-housemaids was the bearer, running along the passages with her crisp dress crackling, her young face all excited and dismayed. She met no one in the passages, so she assured the housekeeper, who sternly admonished her to silence until an hour later when Lady Monkton could be informed. The girl promised, and yet the news spread: ten minutes later Hays was grinning over it in the pantry and Dolly Gapper was telling it in the guard-house, whence Thomas carried it to the gardeners! By the time old Laking, trembling a good deal, was tapping at her mistress's door, everybody at Shank except the mistress knew that Miss Lang had disappeared in the night.

Richard, who still regarded himself and was regarded, as the guest rather than the master of Shank, heard of it last of all and with sensations hard to define. Bewilderment and anxiety were



mingled in his mind, with a new sense of personal responsibility which at the moment his chief desire was to conceal. He had seen enough of his hosts to know that they would be on the alert for any undue interest on his part, so his manner when he joined them in Lady Monkton's morning-room was at first exactly as they would have had it. Beneath that manner Richard found himself watching closely all that passed.

He entered to find the two in conversation as he so often saw them. Lady Monkton lay extended in her long chair. Mr. Ventris stood with his cigarette before the fireplace as his way was after breakfast, listening in silence to her anxious communication and with his meditative eyelids drooping over his observant eyes.

"Her bed has not been slept in," Lady Monkton was saying, "such behavior is unheard-of—where can the girl be?" She turned to Dick as he entered. "You have heard what has happened, Richard, can you throw any light on it?"

Conscious that both of them were watching him, Dick's quick wits controlled his feelings. His host's shake of the head followed the remark that—"maybe she'll ring you up a little later and explain."

Lady Monkton thought it unlikely. "The whole thing is impossible—even as things are today. And we thought Miss Lang so loyal!"

"We were evidently mistaken," came in the cold music of M. Charles's voice. Dick felt his own temper rise.

"You'll have to show something more than this

to convince most people," was all he thought prudent to say.

"Diccon, of course, doesn't know—" said M. Charles; "tell him, Denise."

Lady Monkton shifted her position uneasily, "Miss Lang came to me yesterday and resigned her post," she narrated, "giving some vague excuse about her mother's health—quite insufficient, I thought. Her manner, too, was peculiar. I felt her to be extremely inconsiderate to give up her work—she knows how hard it will be to get the right person—"

"But of course *something* was at the bottom of it all," added M. Charles.

"Aren't you a little hasty?" Dick coolly suggested, still managing to appear as if considering a problem to which he was quite indifferent; "She may have had a sudden summons. You may hear from her at any moment now."

"Of course—of course," M. Charles blandly agreed, with a glance at the lady of the house—"still, Diccon, we have made enquiries and no message came for Miss Lang last night...."

"Just the same," young Monkton argued, "the explanation may be simple enough. For instance, Miss Lang may have been really worried about her mother—and so rung her up on the long distance 'phone and then—"

They stared at him.

"My dear boy—ring up *Scotland* on the telephone—why, it would take all night even if—"

"But how do we know—?"

"How do we know we are not in the States?"



asked M. Charles scornfully, and Dick was silenced, once more conscious of exerting self-control. With that odd sense of the stage, which the others' company so often brought to mind, he took out a cigarette from his new case with the Monkton arms on it and lit it in a mildly protesting sort of way. "All I mean is—that we ought to give Miss Lang the benefit of the doubt. She may be doing a job of some kind. Why do you at once take for granted that something is wrong?"

"Because nothing else in the world would cause the girl to leave Shank in this stealthy and unbecoming manner, without notifying someone in the house," was the reply.

"Perhaps she's fallen somewhere about and hurt herself—"

"That I thought of naturally first of all, Diccon,—but you see, the maid reports that Miss Lang's coat and hat are missing."

A tinge of fear crept over Richard and he said nothing for a moment.

"I see—it's all extraordinary," reluctantly came from him—"but look here, sir, how did she leave and where? If the gates were shut how could she even get out of Shank? That's the thing that alarms me."

"And me too, Richard,—but of course, in so vast a building there must be windows—ways—You and I will investigate immediately."

"If you like," the young man assented, expressing his distaste, however, very plainly—"but all the same, I can't help disbelieving it. I think

you'll find the whole matter capable of some simple explanation."

"I wish I could think so."

Richard turned to Lady Monkton. "Aren't you all very suspicious in this country?" he pleaded. "We'd wait awhile in the States before thinking this meant anything wrong!"

"My dear Diccon—you haven't got Shank in the States," Charles Ventriss said with a certain impatient warmth, "can't I get you to realize what a treasure-house the place is? Here's this vast building filled with valuable objects of art and incapable of being guarded except by the loyalty of our employees. Every day brings offers of many of the things in it—a bombardment of temptation on every human being in the place!"

"I'd be far more inclined, then, to suspect a fellow like Hays, than Miss Lang," Dick said—and repented of his fire the next second. Charles Ventriss made a little noise in his throat.

"There are different ways of assuring oneself of a person's fidelity," he said. "Fear is as good as fealty in some cases," and then hastily—for he too repented of his words the moment after, "but of course I'm not making any rash charges at the moment—"

He paused, while Lady Monkton's troubled voice murmured, "Oh no, Charles, of course not!" and then continued, looking squarely at the younger man, "We'll give Miss Lang until lunch time to show up or explain herself. I don't want a hue and cry above all things. But if no word



comes by that time, then you and I will have to make a thorough search of the premises. I myself am going to the drawing-room now..... Do you remember, Denise, an enormous offer to buy the Mary Casket which came privately to Miss Lang some time ago?"

"Yes—but she brought it to me at once—she was furious."

"She seemed so, of course, but was she? We shall see."

Dick wisely said no more as they left the boudoir and proceeded to the State Drawing-room. He felt, and rightly, that the facts themselves would be far more convincing than any protests of his. To connect Jean Lang with anything like dishonesty seemed to him simply distorted and preposterous, the result of living in the atmosphere wherein Charles Ventris lived, to whom these things were a passion. He was careful to express no exultation when the panes of the vitrine showed their precious contents intact. The Mary Casket gleamed gloriously on its velvet bed, between the other two Cellini jewels of the group. The Medusa head of bluish agate stared with brows twisted in pain at the Centaur-pendant, from whose feet dangled great pearls, and whose tiny, bearded face wore a wicked smile.....

Of course Dick felt no surprise to see them in their place, what pained him was that his companion should.....the taint of suspicion must have gone deep, because M. Charles's perplexity was marked.

"It's very remarkable," was all he ventured, as he locked the doors and came away.

"You'll find I'm right—it's all a tempest in a teapot," Dick spoke confidently; "We shall hear something soon, no doubt." But M. Charles's face remained in a cloud of unwonted gravity.

"I'm sure I hope so," was all he murmured; then seeming disinclined for a talk, he went into the Oak Parlor and shut the door.....

But hour followed hour and no news came. Mr. Ventris was still evidently fixed in his suspicions and Dick found himself mounting the garlanded staircase to the secretary's room, with the utmost reluctance and distaste for the task ahead of them. The elder man's grave face and weighty manner showed how serious he considered it, but Dick was the one to be pitied. Pain must in truth be the portion of any youth forced to enter upon such an enquiry, not thirty-six hours after he had discovered the true meaning of his own feelings.....He was torn between anxiety and bewilderment.....

Mr. Ventris's investigation was thorough. Obeying his order, the room had not been touched and thus, when the door opened, it appeared unchanged from the tranquil order of the night before. The bed was turned down but had not been slept in. On a chair lay the night-dress and slippers which Jean had worn the evening before. A serge coat and short skirt with a small hat were absent from the cupboard. In the desk-drawers lay her cheque-book and an account book showing no unusual entries of money expended



or received. Nothing could be more transparent than these figures, although M. Charles was not slow to point out that only a fool makes entries of illegitimate gains in an account-book. On the dressing-table lay Jean's shabby little purse—there was but a shilling or two in it.....

“Of course, there was probably an accomplice outside,” was M. Charles's comment; and to this observation, Richard, whose disgust mastered him, made no answer. The elder man had been bending over the fire-place looking at some ashes lying therein—a puff of black flakes which appeared to his eye reasonably fresh. As he straightened up again, the mirror over the mantel showed him the full misery of his companion's indignant face and he therefore checked the words which he was about to add.

When Dick abruptly left him at the door of the small anteroom where Miss Lang stored her boxes, he manifested no surprise. The young man had been wholly unable to conceal his disturbance as unfriendly hands probed into Jean's poor, little, neat possessions.....

Later on, M. Charles descended alone to find Sir Richard apparently deep in a book.

“The affair remains perfectly inexplicable,” was all M. Charles vouchsafed; and Dick merely raised his peaked eye-brows but did not lift his sulky eyes from the page.

To the younger man, the affair was a revelation of anger and disappointment. The attitude of Jean's employers, so ready with suspicion, was incomprehensible to one of his temperament and

brought freshly forth in him that latent antagonism to their point of view. Certain aspects of M. Charles's personality were thrown into a disturbing and disagreeable relief. As Dick sat in his corner mechanically turning pages without even seeing the text, he could hear their discussion in Lady Monkton's light lisp, in M. Charles's cool, sophisticated phrases, and realized with rebellious stupefaction that what they questioned was Jean's honesty. Jean's honesty! Jean's loyalty! Why, she bore them as banners before her; in every glance of her wide, grey eyes, in every curl of her lip.....

"These possessions must carry an influence—a taint..." was his reflection, "Mr. Ventriss has been warped by them—his ideas wholly distorted—that must be the explanation."

Dick was still under this cloud—tactfully ignored by his hosts—when he went to his room that night. He had hardly shut his door before there came a timid knock. The intruder, to Dick's surprise, was Annie, the under-housemaid, who had first discovered the disappearance of Miss Lang; and she came with confusion and alarm to confide in him something which she thought he ought to know. The orders to leave the room exactly as found had reached her a few minutes late; just, as Annie confessed, she had picked up a letter lying on the floor and set it alight in the fireplace. Word came that nothing was to be touched: the girl was frightened and crushed out the tiny flame—then, afraid the piece would betray her, thrust it into



her pocket. Never had it dawned upon the stupid Annie that her act would be attributed to the owner of the room; and that she might by this act have destroyed some clue to Jean's disappearance.

"—And I 'ope you'll forgive it, Sir Richard, seeing as I never thought—and Mrs. Laking—she'd be that 'ard on me if she knew—"the round-faced Annie concluded with a sob, holding out to him the charred fragments of paper, and ending with something about—"and they do say as you're the 'ead of the family now, Sir Richard—" to which Dick tried not to listen. This was a day when his heritage never seemed less desirable.

When Annie had departed, her apron to her eyes, he sat down to consider the scraps of paper she had given him. There was part of a half-sheet and the fragment of another, browned into illegibility. A few words upon what was evidently the first page of a letter, remained clear enough to show him that the writing was not Jean's. What he could read was part of two sentences.

"The way out is *up* not *down* the stair. . . . .murderer got in. If anything. . . . .and I much fear it may."

Try as he might, he could gain no more from the charred pieces and soon turned aside from them to pace the room and consider what next to do. "The way out is *up* not *down* the "stair—" Which stair? There were over thirty in Shank and probably more. Yet as he thought, memory

formed a picture in his mind—a clear scene where one man shuddered behind a huge smiling Bacchante to watch another, torch in hand, quickly turning, step by step, the dark twist of a turret stair. The Archbishop's corkscrew in the Rubens Gallery must be meant; there could be no other. The question was should he go alone? There was no doubt that the events of the day had their effect on Dick's mind. M. Charles's ready suspicion roused disgust and resentment; loyalty to M. Charles seemed thus less important than loyalty to Jean. Dick had begun to doubt and wished his doubts resolved: he would follow Jean's trail alone. This letter had led her somewhere—he must discover where; why she had gone and what had befallen her. He owed to himself and to her to get to the bottom of this affair and find out the source of what he had been feeling all along to be an active and definite enmity.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE WAY OUT

**G**REY dawn found Dick entering the Rubens Gallery. The keys to it had presented no difficulty: he knew in which drawer of Mr. Ventris's desk they were kept; and that little, new one was the key which had locked up once more the Archbishop's staircase after his own adventure there. He also knew the spring that moved the big cartoon from the wall, as he and Lady Monkton had examined it together. Dick carried his electric torch (though he didn't expect to use it) and wore rubber-soled shoes and a dark grey suit. He felt like a burglar and a knight errant in one.

It was not without a thrill that he started to mount up and up, on the stair where he had once gone down and down. As he did so, he reflected over the fact that he might have done this before; it was odd he hadn't, when one remembered that the second of the two strangers he had seen during his adventure had come from above. But no one had suggested climbing up and he himself had forgotten or omitted to do

so. Now he would see. . . . . More than once, the sense of someone's presence which the place roused in him made him pause—wait—listen for foot-falls. But all was silent.

Outside, the dawn was brightening into day. When Dick reached the top of the corkscrew flight, he stood in a narrow passage-way, opening at a sharp angle into a longer passage-way having occasional windows high up in the wall. Through these slits he could see that the sky was already blue. . . . . It must be just under the eaves. . . . . On one side of him were doors, some open, some closed, but all giving access to a series of bare and vacant rooms, those which no doubt had once housed the Archbishop's retinue. Here, stone walls were bare and cold, while occasional windows gave upon a succession of roofs and gables with tall chimneys rising out of them. . . .

The corridor came to an end. So far, Dick was puzzled. Nothing could be less communicative than these vacant spaces, opening the one out of the other. . . . . He looked about him. To the left, the room held only a huge, hooded fireplace of rough stone, at the side of which a cupboard door stood ajar. Hastening across the floor, he saw that it revealed no cupboard but a flight of stairs, hidden behind the chimney. He mounted again to find himself upon the roof. . . . . The Archbishop's Palace was now behind him, he stood upon the main wing, dominated by chimneys and parapets. He was more puzzled than ever. One couldn't stay long on the roof for fear of being seen from the Park, but before



returning the way he had come, he must explore still further. There was certainly no clue here to the disappearance of Jean.

The roof, which looked so broad from below, was in reality much encumbered with decorative stone-work and chimney-stacks. Dick turned the corner of one of these and then saw... Facing him and under a projecting gable was an open window. He went over and looked in, then throwing a leg over the sill, he found himself in a small room. More like a cell than a room, this place was unfurnished but for a table and chair. So far as he could make out, it had evidently been used as a sort of junk shop, a store-house from the libraries below stairs. Stacked in the corners and piled upon the floor were old bindings, decayed leather, rusty iron clasps, covers lacking contents and pages lacking covers; bits of old missals and chorals, fragments of sheepskin and parchment. True, there was a rough semblance of order in the heaps and on the table a pile of vellum leaves had been sorted according to size and likeness. One lay apart from the rest with a lump of pumice on it..... Dick looked about him blankly enough: no trace was here of Jean..

He left this small store-room in a deep discouragement. The circumstances seemed to be written in a language he could not read: he pieced the various facts together, yet they did not fit. Had Jean come here? Had she made some discovery which so far escaped him? If so, what?—

The first long sunbeam touched the parapet as Dick came out again. A chimney-stack stand-

ing prominently against the sky, caught his attention, and he wandered over to it. Standing under its shadow he looked about him hither and yon; and suddenly his heart beat because he saw what he had half-unconsciously expected to see.....

Nothing could be more beautiful than the chimneys of Shank. They seemed to grow like clusters of young trees, tall, graceful, their stems carved with an infinite variety of decorative detail, to spring with an exultant aspiration toward the zenith. No two of these chimney-groups were exactly alike, while this stack differed from the rest because it sprang from the ground rather than from the building itself. Ivy grew thickly over this wing and the foot of the stone projection which these chimneys formed was hidden in a bush of it. What Dick saw was merely this..... In the cleft of the recess behind the chimney-stacks, a series of iron bars had been morticed one above the other, forming a ladder which an active person could use without difficulty. One end of this ladder was hidden by the ivy growth at the foot, while the other lay sunk deep in the shadow of the projecting stone-work. Here was a practical method of ingress or egress to Shank, providing that the doors to the roof were always left as unguarded as Dick had found them. If Jean had followed the same route as himself, guided by the suggestion on the charred letter, she might readily by this ladder have descended into the Park, and so away. The question now was not how, but *why*, Jean should have run away.



This was the problem that tormented Monkton as he climbed down the ladder to the ground, pushed aside the matted ivy stems and found himself on the least-frequented side of the Great House. The ivy stems did not part easily: the ladder was evidently seldom used. But surely it was plain that the second man Dick had seen—the one he beheld on the stair, torch in hand, and who was no doubt the murderer of Paul Stern—had made his entry into Shank by this means. And now Dick supposed that Jean, for some amazing reason of her own, had chosen it in order to make her departure. The baffling thing was that nothing he had seen accounted for her disappearance. His expedition to the roof had shown him nothing except an ingenious method of leaving if one wished to do so. But why should she have wished to do so? What had she found that had escaped his eyes? And from whom was the letter which had directed them both to the roof?

Dick spent an hour in the Park wandering and wondering: he was no wiser when he entered the breakfast-room than he had been the night before.

M. Charles's greeting was cheery: he stood by the window reading the Times and one might well have supposed that he had not a care in the world. This serenity of expression did not last very long; but gave way, as he read, to the somewhat harassed look which his face now often wore.

Richard set to work on his breakfast as one

who has had a walk beforehand and for a few minutes neither spoke.

"Any news?" he asked lightly enough and M. Charles's answer was prompt:

"None. I am at my wits' end. The affair is mystifying and vexatious to the highest degree."

"I don't ask," Dick pursued, biting a muffin, "if you found anything out of order, because of course, I know you didn't."

The elder man glanced at him and replied "No," rather shortly. The calm young man was eating his breakfast with the appetite of youth and the remark showed an independence of judgment which caused M. Charles to drum his fingers on the table. Up to this event he had counted on Dick's docility with confidence and on his fidelity as that of a youth owing him everything. At moments lately he had begun to doubt and this doubt was insufferable.

"What are you going to do next?"

"What can one do? There is no law to bring back a runaway secretary if she chooses to give up her wages. I am writing to the girl's mother—"

"Shank seems to be keeping up its reputation, M. Charles, doesn't it? Burglary, murder and disappearances! What will it be tomorrow, I wonder?"

M. Charles looked as though this pleasantry did not amuse him and changed the subject. "I shall be relieved when your affairs and those of the succession are settled, at all events."

"Ah, have you heard from Mr. Scrope?"



"Yes. He writes there is to be another examination at the Law Institute next week. More or less informal, he says; but if I know anything of London, everybody will want to be there."

"More than I shall be."

Mr. Ventriss curbed an irritable gesture. "I can't see why he maintains this attitude," was his inward comment—"It must be an affectation!" while aloud his reply was: "You are probably going to have some fighting, my dear boy, perhaps it will rouse your spirit. Listen to this!" Unfolding the Times, he read aloud:

"Sydney, Australia.

"The Hastings Relief Expedition, from which no news had been heard since its departure from here, has reached the Antarctic ice-pack in safety and is proceeding along Weddell Land. Word was brought by a seal fisher trading at Desolation Island that the exploring party of whom Captain Maitland and Sir Lycett Monkton are the head has been reported as safe in winter quarters, plentifully provisioned. The members three months ago were in good health. The Relief ship Penguin should reach their camp within a comparatively short time. Especial interest attaches to the meeting from the fact that Sir Lycett Monkton will then hear for the first time not only of his inheritance of Shank Park with its magnificent and world-famous collection, but also that a Claimant to them has appeared whose pretensions are supported by the present Lady Monkton....."

While Mr. Ventriss was thus occupied, a footman entered the room and stood waiting for him to finish.

"Mr. Coles, sir, to see you in the Estate Office."

That Coles was a thorn in M. Charles's side

Dick of course, guessed; yet the sharpness of that prick surprised him. Mr. Ventris closed the Times and folded it, with a movement almost violent. That pale actor's face of his, straight mouth and blazing eyes, became a sudden deadly image of hate. He laid down the Times and strode out of the room.....When Dick saw him some hours later, his face had recovered its gentleness, although the purple shadows had deepened under his tired eyes. It was human that, while M. Charles was irritably reflecting on what he felt to be the supreme affectation of the Claimant's reluctance for all the business connected with the succession, the Claimant on his part was surprised to see how unfavorably the nerves of the elder man showed the strain of it! After all, why should he be so intensely concerned? He was not the Claimant.....And then Dick philosophized on the strange passions of men.....feeling the presence of what he could not understand.

The quiet day moved on through its golden hours, bringing with it no news of Jean. More than once Dick felt an impulse to speak of the charred pieces of paper in his pocket and the fruitless expedition they had sent him on.....but some instinct restrained him. It would be hard to speak of them without revealing that which he knew he must hide.....

Save for the cloud that hung over them, the day passed as other days at Shank. Dick had supposed that M. Charles would send for the police, but there was no indication that M. Char-



les had any such intention. He kept a good deal to himself and when he joined them he was more silent than his wont—it was evident that the affair perplexed and depressed him. Dick would have made some show of sympathy—if only M. Charles had been more charitable!

Denise Monkton too, seemed oppressed and fell into one of her fits of languor. When Dick offered to read to her, she accepted, with her warm smile—but her eyes were fixed and there were moments when he knew she was not listening. He felt that she was under high nervous tension which it took all her strength to control . . . . . Once M. Charles joined them for half an hour and spoke in his natural playful vein as though he felt more in spirits. As he approached, her gaze had mutely followed him and when he restlessly wandered off again Dick saw that Lady Monkton's eyes were closed and her face relaxed as though in relief. How pitiable, to his mind, and what a revelation, was her dependence!

After awhile he too felt restless and went for a walk in the Park. Pausing near a gardener at work, he enquired if the clouds portended rain. The old fellow shook his head as he looked upward . . . . .

“It be a koind of a bloight, it be,” was all he vouchsafed and Dick found himself repeating the phrase. That was exactly what it was, he thought; a kind of a blight—a blight over his heart. Oh where was Jean? Why had she fled? Had that long revealing look on the bridge been at the bottom of it?

And then, by the late post, he received a letter: he took it, as a matter of fact, from the hand of Gapper who hobbled up to the Guard-house with the mail-bag. The postmark was London and his first glance showed that the communication was unsigned. The writing occupied but one sheet and was couched in these words:

"Miss Lang is safe, although she has been in great danger. If you wish to know where she is, go alone to the King Street Spink and ask for Lancelot Ayloffé. Above all, if you have any regard for her safety, destroy this letter and make no mention of it or of its contents to anybody in Shank."

That was all. The handwriting was not Jean's: he saw that at once. But he saw something else. Before he carried out the wish of his unknown correspondent and touched a match to the letter, he confirmed this suspicion to certainty. The handwriting on this communication and on the burnt piece which had been given him by Annie the housemaid were unmistakably the same.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE FACE BETWEEN THE CANDLES

**S**USPICION is like a drop of oil; though it fall on the mind in one spot, yet ere long the remotest thoughts are tainted with it. Dick had not finished the destruction of this short note before his uneasiness took the form of a sudden and dominant conviction. Jean had been in danger; Jean had disappeared, someone at Shank was responsible for this danger, for this disappearance. Could it be possible that the surprise was a farce, acted for his benefit? Had Jean's flight been planned and assisted because of his own interest in her? This, Dick reflected, not a little ruefully, was odd when he himself had only just become aware that he *was* interested in her! Yet in the black eyes of M. Charles, there was to be read a world weary knowledge and prevision. . . . Suppose that Jean's loyalty had been worked on in order to play upon Dick's own ignorance of this strange world wherein these people moved: then why should she have been in danger? And surely so melodramatic a form of disappearance would be just the thing to keep a

lover's feeling stimulated and aroused.....? Take it from another angle. Suppose Jean knew something, or had found out something, then what? Something about the man who had been killed, or about the person who had killed him? Something perhaps of obscurer implication?.....  
..He recalled the photograph she showed him, that wedding-group, with the bride in the centre of it smiling under her big, plumed hat. He had seen no trace of it in her room when they searched there, he and M. Charles.....Certainly the affair *was* inexplicable.....

Dimly, Dick began to find his suspicions reaching forth in the direction of a plan—some large plan, intricate and iniquitous, in which Jean's disappearance was merely the removal of a captured piece from the board—in which, he himself, possibly, might be the next pawn to disappear..... This plan, the eyes of his mind beheld only in penumbra of the vaguest outlines—as one had had the sense of Liverpool behind that black curtain of fog—his thoughts ran about the corridors of his imagination baffled, hither and yon, like a blinded man..... These troubled and tumultuous doubts followed him about and deepened with the passing of time though he fought against them. Gratitude, loyalty, affection, made a valiant stand in defence of his hosts..... And yet.....

He tried to divert himself, first with a book, then with a neglected letter to a friend at home. This was harder than the book: Dick tore up a couple of beginnings and in despair strolled over



to the book-cases again. The great Library at Shank had been divided on one side into alcoves, where the cases concealed one from the sight of other persons in the room. A sound at the desk he had just left came to the young man's ears, he lifted his head to peer over the low shelf into the room. Standing beside the desk was the butler, Hays. His back was toward Richard, but light from the near-by window made his actions plain and they were, to say the least, peculiar: He held a magnifying glass, one of those which were always kept in the Manuscript Room, and by its aid he carefully examined the blotter which Dick had just been using. Then he held a pocket-mirror to the blotter. Then he replaced the latter on the desk and turned his attention to the waste basket, picking out the bits of paper containing the unfinished letter which Sir Richard had just thrown into it. Dick could see his sleek dark head, which rose straight from the collar; his bushy eye-brows over red-rimmed eyes and his servile mouth which when it parted showed the gums above the teeth. He worked quietly, his movements were governed by a precision and speed which suggested training of a sort. . . . . Dick held his breath in fear and disgust. He hated Hays. When the butler had collected the bits of paper, he set the basket down and left the room as quickly and noiselessly as he had entered it. . . . .

This incident made Richard still more wretchedly restless. After a moment he too went out, walked about during the afternoon and

gave himself up to formulating the impulse that possessed him. His course was determined. He must go at once to London, find Jean and probe the whole matter to the bottom. Were he in truth Sir Richard Monkton there were responsibilities to be shouldered without delay. Too long, far too long, had others assumed them in his stead. If there was a wrong, he must know it. If M. Charles were being played upon, deceived, misled, about Jean, then he, Richard, must set M. Charles right. In this misery of suspicion he could live no longer. . . . . Whatever the outcome, his doubts must be satisfied.

Turning over these thoughts in his mind on his return to the house and while the grey dusk deepened in the wide spaces of Shank, Dick sat apparently in reverie. All around him was the quiet that only a Great House knows, where sounds become lost and diluted, resolving themselves into mere murmurs of human presence. Fretted ceiling spread over his head—the glorious Sir Joshua smiled down upon him. Through the half-open door the spaces of the drawing-room with their rich contents lost themselves in distance. Without, the fountain in the courtyard gave to his meditations the soft background of falling water. Shank, above, below, about him, spread its vast acres of stately treasure. . . . . Surely, Shank held its own secrets! Not a whisper through those long halls of violent death, of cruelty, of flight, of disappearance? . . . . . Not a whisper. . . . .

Lady Monkton came silently in, delighting



Dick's eye as ever, by the grace of her white draperies. He looked up at the portrait of Lady Molly, from the chair where he sat, and then as Denise paused, he met her questioning gaze with a sober look.

"What are you thinking of, Riccardo mio?" she asked him, "you look so grave."

"I was thinking about death and immortality," he answered as he gave a little shiver.

"Choose a brighter afternoon for such solemn meditations, then—Do you see how dusk it is? It will rain soon....."

He turned his gaze from her to the picture again. "I was just thinking of Lady Molly and her fate—she died, didn't she, of small-pox, not long after Sir Joshua painted her? Well, I love him for giving her such immortality while she was still young and radiantly beautiful. To die, when one looked like that—it's the very worst thing that can happen."

The smile remained on Lady Monkton's lips but vanished from her eyes.

"Do you think death, Diccon, the worst that can befall?" she asked him.

"Why, of course! Don't you?"

His words seemed suddenly to loose some strange emotion in her: startingly, she beat her long hands together.

"Death is not the final end—no, no!" she cried out, in her lisp—"a bitterer ending can happen to beauty than death! It's much harder to see the beauty that one loves, whether of mind or body,

—alter, deteriorate, slowly, steadily for the worse!”

He was moved by her strange vehemence, which seemed beyond her will so that he hardly knew what to answer.

“Ah, but in that case, there’s hope—one can *do* something—” he said awkwardly.....

“Not where we love!”

This was never Dick’s doctrine, and he sprang up from his chair to protest.

“Do you mean we can’t help those we love to do better?” he said incredulously: “why, that’s absurd.....when we love we can influence the person.....”

“No—no,” she repeated and he thought her manner nervously overwrought—“no, no, where we love we can only follow, follow!”

“Oh but that’s a very blind devotion and would lead one into all sorts of trouble... You wouldn’t follow to some bad end—now would you?”

“To whatever end!” She had fought her smile back, but it seemed artificial enough: and she began to speak very fast and incoherently.

“You don’t understand; you are young, far, far too young—you know nothing yet of life and the meshes that lie about one’s feet. You stand in the sunshine, still; it’s all clear to you—natural, simple—There seems only one possible way—you show that so plainly, Diccon: in your world no doubt, it is so! But, oh, later on in life, things change. One hardly noticed the door through which one passed—till one finds oneself in the path where there’s no turning back. Perhaps we



have another by the hand and so we just follow on—to keep—to keep hold of the hand—”

“Like a child in the dark?” He spoke as lightly as he could, to restore her.

“Like a child—into the dark!” she repeated and a long shudder overtook her from head to foot. The young man was embarrassed and troubled: obviousness seemed the safeguard.

“Well I don’t agree—Love brings responsibility.”

“Ah, my dear boy!” she replied and the melody of her voice rang in his ears. They talked no further for M. Charles entered the room, looking and acknowledging that he felt harassed and tired.....

Tea was brought in; but no cheerfulness came with it. M. Charles did not brighten the hour, as was his wont, with his rich vein of knowledge, fancy, anecdote. Lady Monkton had sunk back into quiet, but Dick noticed that her hand shook when it lifted her cup. He himself felt the depression. Ever since the morning of Jean’s disappearance, gloom and apprehension hung over Shank in a cloud.....

As evening drew on, a small rain fell. Lady Monkton, pleading headache, withdrew immediately after dinner, leaving the two men together. Though it was late August, the damp touch of the night made it pleasant to be indoors. The Oak Parlor was filled with soft indirect light, the windows made golden patches on the wet flags of the terrace..... Dick, extending his long frame in an easy chair, had an eye to the

radiance of the room, no less than for the picture which the figure of M. Charles presented at his writing-table. M. Charles declared he had much to do—the sale would take place before many days. He had already several offers for the Canticles, because that work of art had become the talk of Europe.

Therefore he sat in his place writing and making notes. The only lights were placed below the pictures causing them to rise gloriously out of their frames like a vision of saints, revealed to the true worshipper—yet M. Charles wrote by the light of two tall wax candles, their pure and steady flame casting a slender nimbus about his head. His expression was fine and compelling, showing in the repose of thoughtfulness, its lines of dominating will. Dick hated, dreaded what was coming.

“I find I shall have to go to London tomorrow.” He spoke abruptly: he plunged in.

M. Charles abstractedly blotted his page. “Well,” he responded, not yet looking up, “I daresay we can manage to run up to town for the day.”

“I’m afraid that won’t do. I guess I may have to stay several days.”

“Ah?” the polite intonation was untouched, “if it must be so, then perhaps we can manage to stay over a day or so, although it isn’t quite convenient for me to leave Shank this week. Suppose we wait until next? Then we can see Scrope, and I have these tiresome details of the sale—”

Evidently, the plunge had not been deep



enough. "I'm sorry, sir, but next week won't do for me. But there's no need to drag you up to town on my account."

This time M. Charles raised his head and his eyes looked steadily between the two candle flames at his companion.

"H'm—" said he, "private business, eh?"

"I think, sir, it had better be private."

Mr. Ventris blotted another page, wiped his pen with care, slipped his papers into the table drawer, closed it.

"Richard," his tone was studiously playful, "can this be the Declaration of Independence?"

M. Charles had a way of making Dick feel that he were on the stage. Was it the intensity that lay in his face, in the mobile quality of his wonderful voice, the glitter of his glance? He sat so very still, between the candle flames, smiling over his folded hands, that the younger man had a creep not unlike fear. To hide it, he took refuge himself in stage business: lit another cigarette and tried it before replying.

"That would be rather an exaggeration," he answered lightly, "but it's true that I have one or two private matters to attend to and that, for once, I needn't bother you to keep me straight."

"It's no bother. Not only are you a stranger, but your personal situation at the moment is a delicate one—until the Home Secretary grants your petition one doesn't know quite what you are. My dear lad, I'd far rather you didn't go foot-loose in London and perhaps be taken advantage of."

So reasonable, so persuasive his voice! Dick found it hard to answer. M. Charles, as always, had a way of melting one's opposition—had the gift of utilizing against it all the resources of his remarkable personality, which made him well-nigh irresistible. Dick could only say a little gruffly, that he wasn't going to be taken advantage of and a pause fell. The face between the candle flames had lost its delicate and smiling ease.

"Quite so—quite," Mr. Ventris placed his fingers together, "Just the same, I would rather, very much rather, that you were not seen around alone in London just now. I have my reasons—ah, I know the world! What you have to do can't be so important—and I think I have a claim to be heard in these questions of policy when so much hangs on them."

"Unfortunately, sir, it is important—to me."

"You have heard from Jean Lang!"

The words shot at Richard: they almost seemed to leave a streak of flame in the air. He caught and held himself that they should not pierce him but his mouth quivered and M. Charles saw it.....

"You have heard—I insist on knowing what you have heard!"

The youth took refuge in a shrug and kept silence. He was surprised the elder should show such excitement.

"Diccon, I know the world as you can never know it—and I know England—none better—for I am not wholly English. Maybe in your coun-



try things are simpler—and you don't understand.....Diccon, from the first moment that girl spread a net for you.....I suspected it—Denise saw it.....but we both thought you too sensible.....Now she has run away to arouse your sympathy—to spur you on—to entangle you.....Don't you see it all? She is the predatory type, the worse for being well-born, for knowing to the core the advantages you represent. Why, my young friend—” he laughed loudly, harshly, and Dick looked between the candle-flames with a wince for M. Charles seldom laughed—“consider it! What hope is there for such a girl nowadays, after the War? There are a million of 'em—what else can they do? And this chance—shut up here in close propinquity with Monkton of Shank, who knows nobody as yet.....Why, it's too good—it's too good to lose!”

He was really moved.....odd, he should be so much moved! His feelings interfered with his persuasiveness—made that golden stream turgid. Dick looked at him and M. Charles seemed to feel that he had failed of an effect, so he deliberately quieted himself, paused, and went on.....

“You are American-educated and they are supposed to be shrewd enough. This is at the very crisis of your fate as this girl knows very well. Stay away from her.....if only for my sake—and I think you owe me that, Diccon—don't be taken in.”

This recovered control gave Dick a hope he might hear reason. “M. Charles,” he said, speak-

ing very earnestly, "I can't believe your knowledge of the world stops short so you don't recognize honesty, loyalty, when you come across them."

"You say that in face of this woman's suspicious, underhand flight?"

"I do, because I am sure Miss Lang's act will be found to have another explanation."

"What explanation could it have? Oh you are quite, quite mad, my dear boy!"

No help for it, since they had gone so far. "I suspect, sir, Miss Lang found out—something, which made her flight an act of loyalty to you—"

The other stiffened as though he had been suddenly frozen. His voice, when he spoke, dropped a note, "What—is it? What—do you mean?" he said unsteadily.....

It was a quarrel now: no help for it: best speak out and cleanse the air. M. Charles kept his place, but Dick was on his feet. Yet he was much the calmer of the two. There was throughout in the manner of the seated man, a sort of cold agitation very horrible to witness.....

"It's best to be frank—I'm sure it's always best ..... From the first moment, M. Charles, I have felt that there was something—I don't understand.....something, I didn't like.....I'm not ungrateful, M. Charles....it isn't that—but one must know!" He raised his voice, "A man must know where he stands. There is something wrong at Shank.....That man who was shot? Why was it never followed up? And Miss Lang suspected—she must have suspected and so she



ran away.....If only I were sure—because I am always your friend.....Yes: I must see Miss Lang and find out all she knows.....I can't stand this fog any longer.....”

As Dick's sentences, broken with pain, went on, stopped, started again to stop again, Mr. Ventris sat, his gaze stonily steady, deadly as that of a coiled snake waiting for its enemy to move. His head followed with small viperine passes each gesture of the speaker. Thus he dreadfully watched and waited.....

“If we could only talk it over together and set it right,” Dick went on, less hopefully—“you are protecting someone, M. Charles, I fear—if only—?”

The imploring note in his voice brought a certain smile to M. Charles's lips.

“You are a very foolish and fanciful lad—your imagination has run away with you,” he answered, trying to speak lightly while the candles lit the ominous disquiet of his face. “What could be wrong at Shank? But if you really feel that there is anything to be said in Miss Lang's defence, I am quite ready to listen to you—and of course to her.....What is this idea, this suspicion of my secretary's?”

Dick shook his head. “She has not told me.”

“Quite so,” said the other in his mellifluous tone, “whereabouts is she, then, that we may ask her about it?”

“I'm sorry,” Dick replied with an effort, “but I am not allowed to tell you that.”

M. Charles shifted some papers on his desk and

leaned back in his chair: his unquiet smile was more definite.....

"We do not get very far in that event," said he and spread abroad his hands, "Don't you see the fool she's making of you? She whistles and you follow—forgetting all that's been done for you—forgetting everything!"

"No sir, not that—never that."

"Then you certainly will be guided by my experience, Diccon. Be reasonable. I—Lady Monkton is Miss Lang's employer and surely the proper person for her to communicate with. If it be anything wrong so much the more..... Surely she need not be afraid to speak to me if it is as you think?"

He was so convincing; so hard to resist: he waited: Dick miserably waited.

"I am acting, Diccon, in your interests only. You are Monkton of Shank. If you are the sensible and intelligent being I have believed you to be, you will place this matter unreservedly in my hands to be dealt with in a dignified and proper manner. Afterwards it is your own affair. To-night you owe me this at least."

His words fell slowly, weightily; his eyes wide open and commanding, rested on Dick. Dick got up.

"I'm sorry you feel that way about it," was his blunt answer, "because I am not going to give you Miss Lang's address until I've talked to her first."

A deep pause fell; the very portraits on the walls looked down, holding their breath.



“Diccon—be careful how you oppose me.. it is—unwise—to cross me!”

The whisper came from the candle-flames; they wavered, casting strange shadows over the face thrust out between them. Richard made a step toward the door. The wicked eyes glinted.

“Take care!” said M. Charles, “I picked you out of the street.....take care, I don’t send you back to it!”

Their gaze encountered, foil on foil, for a long moment. Then Dick, with a gesture of despair, went out.....;

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### ADVENTURES OF SIX SHILLINGS

ON a ruddy morning after the rain, Richard left Shank. His first impulse had been to go the night before, but this he checked as hot-headed and discourteous to Lady Monkton. Rising early, he packed his bag, into which he did not forget to place the illuminated Virgil given back to him by the purchaser and which he now cherished as a relic of past existence. His feeling was hurt and bewildered: and yet at bottom he did not regard the break as final. When his petition was granted, he and Charles Ventriss would come together again; they were bound by ties which could not be severed through any personal differences.

When his packing was done, he wrote two notes; one to his hostess explaining that he had been called away for a few days and that M. Charles would explain. The other was longer.

"Your anger and insult were hard to bear," Dick wrote, "since neither is deserved. I am simply doing what is sensible as well as right in trying to find out where I stand. But I owe you too many kindnesses to leave you without a word.



I shall write you my plans when they are settled—and I wish you could have let me go without such bitter words. Foolish words, too, let me say, for if I am not Monkton of Shank you could not make me so and if I am Monkton of Shank your anger will not alter the fact.”

This thought lingered in Dick’s mind as he strode off, bag in hand, to the railway station, having refused the butler’s horrified offers to send him there in the motor. He walked down the avenue and at the lodge, turned for a last look at the splendid pile, lying in all its insolent stateliness under the morning sunshine. “If *that* is mine,” was his defiance, “they cannot keep me out of it!” and he set his face forward whistling. At the bottom of his mood lay the warm and golden certainty that he was going to see Jean. True, he had avoided committing himself in that regard during last night’s quarrel, but largely from a young shyness of self-defence. His feeling had in all honesty hardly yet crystallized into any resolve. Had he been asked point-blank if he intended to marry Jean he would have answered truthfully that he did not know. How could he know when he could look back only on a long interchange of glances? What he *did* know was a two-fold fact of feeling—first that he needed Jean, because in her company he was at peace, he was himself; second, he believed in her honesty, in her truth. This last had grown from an uneasiness to a vital necessity, to an imperious demand of the soul. In all that gorgeous maze of Shank and in the strange group moving within it to their own ends, the beloved, picturesque M.

Charles, the obscurely-tortured Denise Monkton; their subordinates, the subservient Scrope, the untrustworthy Hays, the sinister Coles—among all these personalities Jean alone had walked in the light.....One could trust Jean, believe in Jean.

Thus as Dick drew away from those gilded towers, somehow his spirit lightened. He had a fancy that to live at Shank was to submit to age-long influences of greed and arrogance and deceit. Shank had housed tyrannies and cruelties and crimes—it had created its own atmosphere and this was peculiar and not wholesome. To live for and with all that beauty, which centuries had as it were atrophied, seemed strangely to have warped the nature of its possessors. The perpetual suggestion had atrophied in them also certain of the more human qualities so there had grown up within those walls elements which might readily turn toward the monstrous..... Life must not, to be vital, to be real, centre wholly upon things.....

Beyond the gates of Shank the pleasant countryside turned to Dick a fresh and welcome countenance.....The village street was full of children with faded pinafores and wheat-colored hair. Boys were taking down shop-window shutters, maids were on their knees by the doorstep; bakers' carts were rattling by, it was all bright, material, comfortable, like home. That home had often seemed ugly and arid, when one's soul was starved for beauty but at this moment the memory of it was recalled like a charm to dis-



solve an evil spell. Yet, Dick reflected, as he underwent this familiar reaction of the American—why should the spell be evil? What caused it was the nature of the owners, not of the beauty itself. Or was it from a mere surfeit of possessions? Anyhow, the evil at Shank lay not in things, but in men. . . . .

By this time, he had reached the railway and setting down his bag, put hand in pocket for his wallet, in order to buy his ticket. His wallet was not there. Moreover his wallet was not in any of his pockets, nor in his bag—nor anywhere. Bewildered, he stood like a man stunned—trying to remember. His recollection could not lie. He had looked through his resources of money before placing his wallet in his accustomed pocket. He had breakfast alone and just before leaving, Hays had taken his coat respectfully away in order, as he said, to brush it—Hays, of course!

The situation was serious. In Dick's trouser pocket he had but five or six shillings—and London was forty miles away. Moreover, he had well-nigh depleted his little capital taken from the States—and his wallet therefore held pretty nearly every cent he had in the world. A very simple and effective method to stop his journey!—this was his grim reflection and a new determination swept over him that it should *not* stop his journey! They under-estimated him—he thought—and they should see.

What to do next was the question. Return to Shank and make a row? It would be useless as

he knew very well.....His bag seemed heavy as he left the station platform and turned slowly once more into the village-street.....A few yards further on he met Mr. Waverley, the vicar, also carrying a bag, and on foot which was by no means his habit. The Rev. Herbert Waverley was a soft and portly personage, talkative and good-humored. This morning, however, he looked put out and puffed with haste and vexation.

"So annoying, Sir Richard," he burst forth upon their greeting, "that beast of a chauffeur of mine chose last night to get drunk again..... And here I am, due at Bramley for a wedding at noon and nothing but that slow train—missed the express ! If it should be late—!"

"Is that so?" Dick had a flash of inspiration—"too bad—but you've an American car, haven't you? Why not let me drive you down, sir? We could beat that old train by half an-hour if we start right off. I am off to London; but I'll pick up the train at Bramley every bit as well and I'd far rather spin you down."

"Not really?" responded the vicar and it was pleasant to see the genial smile break out like sunshine on his clearing face, "Would you, Sir Richard? Could you now?—Of course—and you know all about these American motor-cars! Really, it would be most kind and such a piece of luck for me!"

"And for me," said Sir Richard truthfully enough; for Bramley was twenty miles nearer to London than Shankmere.



"Dear, dear—what a piece of luck," Mr. Waverley repeated with the happiest accent of relief—"Shall we be getting on to the garage—it's just around the corner? Oh, I am obliged—an old friend's daughter, you know, and all of them expecting me to officiate.....Hate to hurry at a wedding, y'know—so undignified—and I counted on the car. No doubt that lazy beast of mine will have sobered up enough by tomorrow to bring me home—but today he's blind..... And how's dear Lady Monkton and all at Shank?"

Thus chatting in the fullness of his relief, the vicar conducted Dick to the garage where their bags were stowed away into the car and within a few minutes more they were gliding gaily along the smooth high-road to London. At the bridge, Dick looked back. Shank rose gloriously upon its hill and towered over them. Another flash and it was gone.

If the sky was not the bright turquoise to which Dick was accustomed, yet it was limpid and studded with small clouds. Before them, the road stretched like a brown ribbon, on either hand. The cottages sat, with their thatched roofs pulled over their eyes.

Eased of his anxiety, the vicar discoursed gaily in his round and mellow voice. The weather—the crops—the beauty of Shank—the car, which had been a gift from his parishioners, all were passed in review. Dick was questioned on matters American, the goodness of its motors, the badness of its roads, the kinds of its August

weather, and Mr. Waverley's bushy eyebrows and smiling mouth went up and down in sympathetic tune to the replies. For him the States possessed that fascination which they keep for so many quiet and untravelled Englishmen as the land of gigantic and limitless possibilities.

"Did you chance to meet the lady, your country-woman, who stayed some weeks at Shank Paddock?" Mr. Waverley asked, as Dick slowed the car to pass a flock of sheep. "We still keep up that custom you know, Sir Richard, of letting those rooms. Began it during the War and Mrs. Waverley is loath to give it up while taxes are still so appalling—this Mrs. Byrd was very interesting to me. Did you know her?"

Dick answered that they had only talked together on two occasions; but that she had come to his rescue in the little matter of the burglar at Shank, of which he supposed Mr. Waverley had heard.

"Quite so. Most amazing person—seemed to have no end of dollars. I never heard her ask once," the vicar stated impressively, "about the cost of anything—! Although she was middle-aged she had such a fund of quaint humor—expressions I had never even heard. . . . . And she carried a pistol which she called a gun!"

Dick laughed and said he had cause to be glad she did.

"Altogether, we liked Mrs. Byrd *very* much: I believe however that Lady Monkton did not call on her—of course being in mourning—she did not feel. . . . . But after Mrs. Byrd left



Shank Paddock, there was a rumor over the place that she was really an expert archaeologist investigating the antiques in the neighborhood. She never seemed to *us* to show any special interest in antiques. Wasn't it odd?"

Dick agreed that it was odd and inwardly wondered a little. The car sped smoothly on.

As the vicar joyfully observed half-past eleven had not struck when they entered the main square of Bramley. A fine Abbey rose on one side of the square and there were still some beetle-browed old houses frowning over the narrow streets but the general effect was modern; or rather it showed plainly enough the modern growth upon the ancient stem. The churchyard was reached through a Priory gate, with worn carvings supported on either hand by plate-glass shop-windows full of post-cards and souvenirs.

Mr. Waverley's friends lived beyond the town in an obese, brick mansion, of the bow-windowed, ivy-covered type, set in lawns with ornamental shrubbery and neither a manor-house nor a villa. It suggested youth, a good background and furnishings of the early Victorian era. That festivities of no small importance were in progress was evident from the air of subdued bustle, voices from the open windows and the joyous rapidity with which the door was opened to the vicar.

Naturally enough, Monkton's own situation occupied his mind during the last few miles of the drive. The lucky accident of meeting Mr. Waverley had of course brought him that much

nearer London; but a capital of six shillings is not much to enter that city at present, whatever it may have been in the past. He remembered that he had in his possession his father's gold watch which was good, though old, and his new silver cigarette-case. One could hardly have pawned these at Shankmere without exciting gossip, but he ought to be able to do so at Bramley. Once in London, there was the Virgil—it had brought £50 at his father's sale.....And after all, what was twenty-two miles? One could walk half of it during the long, sunshiny afternoon when no doubt at the end of ten miles or so, one should strike a tram-line into London.....

As the car turned into the rhododendron-bordered drive and stopped before the welcoming butler, Dick had made up his mind to bid Mr. Waverley then and there a gay and nonchalant farewell. But this action, so natural in Dick's eyes, appeared to fill the vicar with unwonted horror as quite unbecoming to Monkton of Shank. His shocked protest of "on no account, my dear fellow—wait a moment, I beg!" seemed so heartfelt that Dick could only acquiesce, recognizing the signs assuring him that what he proposed "wasn't done." "The fuss they make about the things that aren't done!" he murmured to himself resignedly. A servant had seized his bag, and Mr. Waverley with further protests, literally dived into the interior of his friend's residence. In another moment he was out again,



followed by a big, fine-looking, bearded Squire of a man, both of them talking at once—and talking so hard that it took Dick a moment, in his great astonishment, to realize that they were insisting he should remain for the wedding.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### SIX SHILLINGS GO TO A WEDDING

“GO away? Lunch anywhere else but in my house, today of all days?” the Squire was asseverating in a voice as big as he was. “What, —Sir Richard Monkton—know Lady Monkton very well—knew Sir Piers for years—why, ’t isn’t to be thought of, couldn’t be permitted for an instant—!”

“And if it hadn’t been for Sir Richard, I might even have been late—*late!*” this, impressively, from the vicar.

“Quite so. Outrageous—my dear fella! You won’t grieve us by a refusal? You won’t cast a cloud over Muriel’s happiness? She’d be miserable if she thought—. London can always wait. And there are some people coming down you are sure to know—all friends of course. No strangers!”

If Dick was amused that this assurance was necessary to the Squire’s mind, yet it seemed more natural to him than to many Americans because of the habits of his birthplace. He remembered his father’s tale of a lady who gave



similar assurances to her guests, because, as she put it, "I know that Philadelphians only want to meet Philadelphians!" His doubts were on another score. He wore his grey suit and he thought it a very nice suit, but he made some remark about his clothes not being "just the ticket" for a wedding. But Dick had not yet learned the difference there is in England between the inside and the outside, and what a license it gave one to be Sir Richard Monkton of Shank. The Squire brushed the objection aside as applying to none but lesser mortals.

"Oh come, come, we're not so bad as all that, y'know—not since the War anyway—my sons can help you out—mustn't leave us on that excuse.....!" and so on. So unforced was this hospitality, so cordial and jolly, that the young man could not stand out against it any longer. Almost before he realized it, he was ushered indoors into rooms filled with the scent of roses where little maids were running about all rosy and excited. He was given into the charge of a tall officer son of the house, who accepted his rather dazed entrance into their family circle as the most natural thing in the world. Certainly, life even within the limit of six shillings, had its smiling moments.

As the kaleidoscope of the day revolved, its bright hours fell into patterns of gayety. Dick liked the family. The Squire was a huge man at whose heel a dog was always trotting: his sons were just as big, but they had the wooden expression of their generation as opposed to the

bluff exuberance of his. They drawled where he was explosive; were stiff while he gesticulated, moved with a middle-aged precision while his "God bless my soul!" could be heard all over the house. The Squire's wife was tall and grey-haired and today wore much lace and there was a youngster or two whose curls shone in the sun. The bride gave Dick a kind welcome though a thought distracted, as was but natural. Several motors from town appeared and among them who but Lady Cecily, that "young giantess with the bales of hair," Dick had met in London! Although he had thought her the most unresponsive of handsome girls and their talk had been confined to an interchange of banalities, yet Dick found she claimed him as a friend and undertook to pin a wedding-favor on his coat with an air of sisterly responsibility. He realized that the English being slow in talk, had come to base acquaintance upon undercurrents of sympathy which they are sensitive and quick to detect.

When the wedding party was assembled the younger members of it strolled over to the Abbey church, where the bride's cousin played the organ and where already was gathered a decorous congregation. Things took their wonted course with smoothness and dignity. Mr. Waverley with his jerky sentences and plaintive manner, became robed and transformed into a being of artificial voice, unnatural intonation and pontifical solemnity. "The Voice that breathed o'er Eden" conducted the party of pretty girls up to



the altar, and "Oh Perfect Love" led them down again. The Squire looked more nervous than his daughter and his great sigh of relief on emerging from the porch resounded all over the church-yard. A group of quaintly-dressed elderly persons were gathered just outside to give greeting by courtesies and murmurs in a dialect Dick failed to understand—while an extremely neat and shy little girl presented a bouquet to the bride.

Monkton of Shank, by this time, was feeling almost at home. He looked about him as one does when among friends. The officer sons were splendid chaps: the children were fine little kids. If the bridegroom looked pale and stupid, the bride was "a peach"—and this time the term was accurately descriptive. When they trooped out he did not forget to say nice American things to the tall Lady Cecily and all the way over to the house afterwards he was absorbed by the discovery that he was ravenously hungry.

"The Lord is certainly looking after my six shillings!" was his thought, as he started in to gratify that hunger. The wedding breakfast was spread on the terrace at the back of the house—which made a banqueting-hall with a soft green carpet and a bright, blue ceiling. Dick couldn't see why there were awnings to keep off what he felt to be rather a tepid sun. He sat at the bride's table, and was called the Wedding-Guest—and talked and laughed and made a speech which was no worse—if no better, than the others. Mr. Waverley, once more himself, quite beamed upon

him. The Squire discussed anxiously with him the attitude of the States—"What do your public men now really think about the state of Europe, and is all the burden to fall on the United Kingdom?"

The son of the house asked questions concerning big game shooting, base-ball, Palm Beach and Hollywood, which he thought to be in adjoining counties—and the cabarets of New York,—and was privately immensely surprised at the ignorance which Monkton showed of all but one of these topics.....

The day waned. The wedding-party was photographed on the terrace with Sir Richard standing by the Squire.....Then the bride changed into "powder-blue" with a long dust-cloak and a hat with a sweeping feather in it and went away on a terrific journey of an hour and a half. Richard threw rice with the rest; by this time he had come to accept the smile of Destiny so was not in the least surprised to find himself—thanks and farewells over—bowling along the road to town in Lady Cecily's two-seater. That young woman had not hesitated to express to him her indignation that Sir Richard Monkton of Shank should be taking the train to London.

"I s'pose you really *are* Sir Richard?" she added with the candor of her race: and looked oddly at him when he as frankly admitted that he didn't know.

The one drawback to this delightful day had been Dick's fear that he might reach King Street after closing hours. But Lady Cecily handled



her car with the recklessness of youth, unhamp-  
ered by any need to think about the road. It was  
only five o'clock when she set him down at his  
request in Piccadilly and no sooner was she out of  
sight when he hurried off down St. James's in the  
direction of his goal.

The shop for which he was bound consists of  
an outer and an inner room—more like drawing-  
rooms than anything else with cabinets and vit-  
rines crowded with small and precious objects,  
ancient jewellery, Canton enamels, ivories,  
bronzes and porcelains. No one occupied the  
outer room save a youth setting things to rights,  
but Dick had hardly uttered the name of Lance-  
lot Ayloffé than he heard an exclamation in the  
back premises and there darted out upon him a  
small, alert man—not many years older than  
himself and evidently in a state of high nervous  
tension. Even before he spoke he ran to the  
door and pulled the blinds down over the glass  
panels.

"Sir Richard Monkton?" was his greeting, and  
his manner could not have been crisper: "Yes..  
....yes..... Where *have* you been? The  
Chief said you would be in today."

"But—" said Dick staring.

"Come in here, please—I'd almost given you  
up—just going to telephone about you—No: we  
won't stay out here—somebody might come in  
any minute. Bring the bag, Jack," he said, and  
almost pushed the new arrival into the inner  
apartment. This was more intimate than the out-  
er but none the less rich; with velvet curtains and

hangings of dark red; cabinets with more jewels and bibelots against the walls; inlaid armor over the hearth and a long narrow table in no way resembling a counter, with a velvet cloth on it . . . . . An elderly man was replacing necklaces in a drawer and did not turn his head.

"Sorry, Sir Richard, but it's so late—the first thing we must do is to get you out of here safely . . . . . We close in a few minutes and there's been a man hanging 'round the place all day . . . . . Did you see him as you came in?"

"I didn't notice—but then I wasn't looking," Dick answered, hesitating, puzzled and shy, now that it had come to the point of saying the name that was on his lips. "I came to ask you about an address—of a friend—I was told that you would tell me—"

Mr. Lancelot Ayloffé had very bright eyes and a round, intelligent, good-humored face, whose expression was at this moment, however, decidedly anxious. He seemed hardly able to wait until the other had finished speaking; he fidgeted and cast apprehensive glances toward the door..

"That'll come all in good time," he replied, "the question pressing now is to get you into safety. You weren't molested as you came in?"

"Good heavens, no!" Dick thought the man must be out of his head, but his rapid words continued with sincere conviction.

"The Chief said not—I thought you would be—there was poor Stern, you know. You've the Virgil in that bag, I hope? Good. Well, we've got to get you a place for a night or so—"



Ayloffé couldn't be crazy, he was too business-like, although as one who is pressed for time.

"It will have to be a pretty cheap joint at that—" Dick was forced to utter, but Ayloffé had already picked up his bag....."Perhaps you'll help me to get a loan on the Virgil—you see—"

"Oh, that's all right! I knew you wouldn't be having any money—" the other replied as if it were of no importance, "the Chief said you wouldn't—but that too can wait. Fortunately, I can fix you up for the moment—"

"But—" was all Dick got out, unable to finish as he wished by saying—"Who's the Chief—and how in Sam Hill did he know I'd lose my wallet?" because the other man was so evidently in such a hurry that he paid no attention at all.

"We mustn't waste another second," he ejaculated, "Someone'll catch sight of us in here first thing you know—Come along with me!"

The inner shop had no apparent exit, but as Ayloffé carrying Richard's bag turned the corner of the long table, the elderly assistant who had been at work there stooped and lifted a trap-door which opened on a flight of stairs. Down this Mr. Ayloffé plunged with clattering heels and Monkton after him. Doubts and hesitations crossed his mind but after all he was too poor to rob, and no alternative to this adventure offered itself to his mind at the moment.

The stairs led merely to a work-room, white painted, with windows on an area, before which sat several workmen bent over small machines with magnifying lenses screwed into their eyes.

Another door, and Aylofffe led the way through a long grimy passage, a cellar smelling of dust and stacked with crates and boxes. With a key he unlocked the door into a second cellar running at right angles to the first and Dick soon found himself in another passage, climbing a tall staircase. It was quiet: they encountered nobody and by the doors on various landings he could perceive that the house was occupied with sets of chambers.

At the very top, his guide opened a final door, discovering a bedroom, clean and comfortable if somewhat dingy, whose windows looked upon St. James's Square. Upon a table was a tray with cold meat and salad. This haven reached, Mr. Aylofffe set down the bag and wiped his brow.

"Sorry I can't stay—have to go back at once," he remarked, still with that concentration of anxiety, "don't know what may turn up in the next hour. . . . . I was in a wax about you as the day went on—though the Chief thought you'd be late. . . . . You're quite safe here, keep your door locked and don't show yourself at the window. . . . . Oh I know you want to hear all about it and I'll run up tomorrow just as early as I can—" He was evidently fidgeting to be off.

"But look here!" the other cried disgusted and embarrassed, "I don't understand—I came merely to ask where—"

"Miss Lang's all right—I was to say that right away—She's all right," Aylofffe replied and hurried to the door; "Keep yourself to yourself till I return now, Monkton, won't you? There's



a good fellow, and more hangs on it perhaps than you can realize—”

Then, seeing the disappointment in Richard's face, the little man came back into the room and commanded himself to use a quieter voice and manner.

“The Chief said we could rely on you entirely . . . . . I know it's hard but I'll be here as early as I possibly can.” He was half out of the door again as he spoke the last words, but he knocked once more on the panels to bid Monkton lock it after him.

Maddening as the puzzle and the disappointment were to Richard, yet it was plain that Ayloff's solicitude concerned not himself but his quest. Whatever harm was afoot, Ayloff's rôle must be that of protector and Dick was far too ignorant to protest or to refuse obedience. Moreover, he was beginning to feel tired and the silence of the room was grateful. He tried to work out who these people were and what it all meant. Above all, how did this “Chief” of theirs know so accurately what his, Dick's movements had been and were going to be? How for example did this mysterious person know he would be robbed of his wallet? Unless—oh but it was all mad, like a bad dream!

He sat for a long time, wandering in a maze of conjecture and finally gave it up, ate some supper and tumbled into bed and into a sound sleep.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE KING STREET SPINK

**A** VIOLENT pounding on the door awakened him and he sprang out of bed to admit his host of the night before who came in bearing a tray laden with a substantial breakfast. Mr. Ayloff's manner was quieter and less intense this morning, he appeared indeed to be a trifle apologetic.

"I am due at the shop as soon as possible," he told his guest, "but I know you must want to ask many questions and there are some I must ask on my side."

"Sit there and ask them while I get some clothes on," Dick suggested, "I suppose you know that I'm still in the dark?"

"I know—but I must ask before answering. Last night, I had your safety to think of. Now do you mind telling me what happened at Shank just before you left there?"

Ayloff's voice and manner had a certain gravity; his bright eyes were fixed on Dick's face. His personality puzzled the latter a little for the extremely cultivated voice and choice of words



were accompanied by an almost commercial readiness of manner. If he were English, he had evidently lived much out of England and in a tenser atmosphere. Plainly, however, there was no excuse for not complying, so Richard told all, concealing only the underlying cause of his quarrel with Mr. Ventris. He hoped that Ayloffé's reply would give him the address he longed for, but he was disappointed. After a considerable pause, Ayloffé began on ancient history.

"I suppose I need not tell you, Sir Richard, that during the last few years there had been a steady rise in the value of books, pictures and all art objects? Thousands of pounds have changed hands, while the demand in the States—especially for fine illuminated manuscripts and pictures has continued to increase—but this you know?"

"I've been hearing so at least."

"Certain firms have made enormous profits, among them A. Dulacq & Cie.—you have heard of them?"

"I think so," Dick recalled M. Charles's talk at Monkton House, "in New York, aren't they? picture dealers?"

"Paintings and miniatures; illuminated manuscripts particularly. I myself am a member of the firm," Ayloffé proceeded, "which is headed by two Frenchmen, brothers. One, M. Jerome, lives in New York—the younger, M. Anatole, in Paris. We are not only dealers but authorities, experts; the last word comes from us in any question of genuineness. That's what makes this

whole affair so important. Well then. Two years ago we purchased three especially beautiful illuminated manuscripts which were put on the market in Paris by Sir Piers Monkton of Shank. There was no hesitation at all in buying from such a source and M. Anatole paid out close to £10,000, confident of a handsome profit in New York from clients and collectors there. You can imagine therefore his feelings when he received a letter from his brother casting grave doubt on the genuineness of two of these items and stating the opinion that they were modern work although on ancient materials. M. Anatole took the next steamer and on his arrival a conference of partners immediately took place, at which I was present.

"I mustn't take the time to give you M. Jerome's evidence. It was extremely technical based on minute measurements of brushstrokes, on the faint traces of photography and on the chemistry of color. These last, although ground and prepared in the ancient way, showed evidence of recent composition. There were also one or two errors of detail such as a modern artist could hardly escape. Even M. Anatole, who had arrived in a state of indignation, was convinced. At the same time the work was so painstaking and so beautiful that it was not surprising it should have imposed on M. Anatole, and originally, as he supposed, on Sir Piers and his curator Mr. Charles Ventris."

Ayloff paused. A cloud had settled on Dick's face but he nodded the other to proceed.



"A firm like Dulacq's has no higher asset than its reputation. To sponsor a forgery meant bankruptcy in a year. The suspected manuscripts were locked in the safe and I returned to England with M. Anatole for the purpose of making an investigation."

"Sir Piers was still alive then, wasn't he?"

"Yes: though not in good health."

"Did you talk to him?"

"M. Anatole did at once. Of course he pooh-poohed the whole matter. He referred M. Anatole to Mr. Ventris, who was away at the time, but on my advice M. Anatole postponed that interview. He has still postponed it."

"What did you do then?"

"What could we do? We let the matter rest. It was plain that if we were deceived, the owners of Shank were also. Mr. Ventris's reputation as expert is higher than that of M. Jerome Dulacq—and his authority in England is unquestioned. Dulacq's owed Shank many courtesies and not a few good customers. What action could we take which would not react on ourselves?"

"I see."

"Last winter Sir Piers died. His heir we heard was determined on dispersing the collections. We began to have letters of enquiry, commissions. Collectors were on the *qui vive* at the chance of securing some of the famous objects at Shank. M. Anatole's uneasiness revived. If we were to be large buyers our doubts must be satisfied..... Suddenly a Claimant appeared

backed by Mr. Ventriss and Lady Monkton and accompanied by a new person on the scene—a man named Coles.”

Dick smiled a thought contemptuously and Ayloffé saw it. Just as Sir Piers had smiled, with a twist of the peaked brows and a glance suggesting that foreigners were so apt to get excited. . . . !

“Don’t mistake me. The significance of Coles lay in this—that he was the first figure on the scene who might be definitely termed undesirable. . . . . We had been moving in circles where suspicion was an absurdity—among persons of family and position—”

“Was Lady Monkton a person of family?” asked Dick and Lancelot Ayloffé looked at him in surprise. Perhaps he was of more independence than they had inferred.

“I believe not,” he admitted. “She was of French origin and I won’t deny there had been stories—but still!—Coles was entirely a different matter. He had a definitely bad record and what was more important he had a friend who was butler at Shank, and against this friend, a man named Hays, there lay a charge, though never pushed, of forgery.”

“You mean that Hays forged manuscripts!” Dick cried and was suddenly fixed by a recollection of the butler standing by the desk he himself had just quitted—of the silent, skilled rapidity in the movements of those long, fine fingers. Lance Ayloffé shrugged.

“To that, I cannot answer yes or no. I can only say that the appearance of these two men



gave so dark a color to the situation, that we felt the time had come for action. An expert detective from the Government force at Washington was sent down to Shankmere, together with an assistant whom we had once employed at Dulacq's—poor fellow! You knew him as Paul Stern."

"You mean the burglar?"

"Stern was no burglar," replied the other, rising and restlessly moving about the room; "His death is still involved in mystery which Scotland Yard has done little to clear up. We know that he must have been following some trail when he was discovered and shot. I have been to Scotland Yard myself but they have no evidence on which to make an arrest. Of course I thought it was Hays or Coles, but there's no doubt that there's an alibi, a definite alibi for both of these men. So what am I to think?"

Dick shook his head. "I never believed the burglary story, despite the inquest. But I do know that there was a struggle of more than one man in that dark passage. I wish I had seen more."

"You kept nothing back then at the inquest?"

"I had no reason. I told all I knew. But look here, Mr. Ayloff," Dick said with directness, "although I understand all you have told me, yet it doesn't explain why I am shut up here, why Miss Lang disappeared overnight—and what it's all about anyway?"

Ayloff had paused by the window, hands in pockets. He was evidently trying to arrange his

ideas with the purpose of making a certain impression on Monkton. He answered patiently.

"I'll have to ask you to let me tell that in my own way one thing at a time." He came back to his chair, sat down again with an air of concentration. "After all," he repeated, "I can only tell you what I know. The Chief said that your knowledge would be of great assistance to us. But for that, I think you would hardly have been taken into our confidence at this stage of the enquiry."

He was still wondering a little what sort of a person this young man might be, who looked so like, yet so unlike, the late Monkton of Shank. Richard nodded him to proceed.

"To take up these events in order brings me then to the news which reached us from France not long after the mysterious death of poor Stern. The discovery of the Canticles was announced and its proposed sale at a high figure. The Chief left for Paris at once and after some trouble got a look at it. You can guess the result."

Dick said in a lowered voice: "I feared it was not genuine—although it was so beautiful!"

Ayloffé struck the arm of his chair. "That's it!" he cried explosively, "it's *too* beautiful to be anything but genuine. If the Canticles is a forgery—it's a superb forgery! I own that M. Jerome has not convinced me—he can't explain the miracle of its perfection! And yet! What caused your own doubt?"

"The olive-tree," said Dick slowly, "in the



fourth miniature. My father's Virgil had the same."

"Ah," said Ayloffé in another voice, "the Virgil you have in your bag there? The Chief was right then—you *were* in danger!"

He paused thinking deeply and both were silent. By tacit agreement the question of the Canticles was not reopened between them. To that beauty Ayloffé felt a certain loyalty and he could not question it further—he preferred to turn to the events of the strange drama they were discussing.

"Meanwhile another investigator had been starting on her own account, I mean, of course, Miss Lang. Now Miss Lang has not yet told us quite all she knows, but her evidence further implicates the household at Shank. She says that once her suspicions were aroused she resigned her position and prepared to leave Shank. The night after she had done this, she discovered a very cunning attempt to discredit her, by hiding in her trunk one of the gems of the collection—the Cellini box known as the Mary Casket. This troubled and frightened her so much that she opened a letter a friend had given her and by its advice, visited the roof by the same route you have just described to me. The charred fragment you read was evidently the same which guided Miss Lang. But the little room revealed more to her than to you. Among the piles of parchment was a sheet with a torn cover and it suggested the fragment of parchment which had been found lying by Stern's dead body. She hurried down

to her room where she kept the piece, compared the two and found that they fitted. At once, (very recklessly it seems to me) she returned to the roof in search of further evidence. Unfortunately, this second time she became aware that she was being followed and her return to the staircase was cut off. She's a brave girl, Miss Lang, and it took pluck to descend by that ladder between the chimneys in the dark! She started to run across the Park but her pursuer was too quick and struck at her head with a heavy stick. The blow missed, but the clever creature fell down as if she had been stunned and lay with closed eyes—she owes her life to her quick wit at any rate."

The narrator discreetly looked out of the window and Richard became aware of his own voice enquiring steadily:

"Was she hurt?"

"Owing to her quickness—no. The man bent over her while she lay still, moaning once or twice. The darkness aided her ruse but of course it made her unable to identify her assailant. He tried to lift her but she was too heavy so he set off toward the Great House plainly in search of help. When he had gone, she got to her feet and made her way to the nearest farm where she crawled into the open window of a shed over the hen-house. There was straw in the shed and she rested there till day; when she made her way by slow degrees to another railway station beyond Shankmere and so reached London in safety."

"Where is she now?"



Mr. Ayloffé looked surprised. "I thought you knew. She and the Chief left yesterday on a motor-trip to Scotland."

A light broke over Monkton. "The Chief then?"

"You knew her by her name, I suppose. Mrs. Byrd."

"Mrs. Byrd—that nice grey-haired woman—a *detective*?"

"Yes: one of the foremost in her own line. Up to the present," Ayloffé added, "she considers the case a failure, she tells me. But she has not given it up. What we lack is proof."

"*Proof*! And Miss Lang attacked and nearly killed!"

"True. But Miss Lang cannot say who attacked her. She had to keep her eyes shut, you know. The fragment of parchment is not enough evidence to arrest anyone—even if she had it still, and she hasn't. Suspicion centres upon Shank, but against whom are we to proceed? Remember, both Hays and Coles have an alibi on the evening Stern was killed. They were drinking together at the Spotted Doe at Endwise as the landlord and others can testify. Hays was absent at the Great House dinner because his mistress was in town."

Dick remembered what he had himself heard and knew this to be true.

"But it must be Hays who attacked Miss Lang! Can't you arrest him for that?"

"Don't you see Sir Richard, that Miss Lang must give a reason? The whole matter then

comes out—all privacy is at an end if that occurs. What will happen to Dulacq's in that event? With these important sales coming off at Christie's during the next few weeks? No: no! That is what M. Jerome has told Mrs. Byrd in the most emphatic way. There is to be no publicity while any doubt remains or any chance of retaliation that would react upon our firm. Why, the mere hint of such a thing will kill the market for months! And besides—"

He left the sentence unfinished and Dick knew why. There was one corner of the affair into which neither of them liked to look and when Ayloffé spoke again it was to repeat:

"The whole matter is too serious—that is what Mrs. Byrd feels. She must have more to work on. That is why your aid has been asked, Sir Richard, and I fear she is going to be disappointed that you can tell us so little."

"Mr. Ayloffé, whom does she suspect?"

"Honestly," Ayloffé answered, "I don't know."

In his turn, Monkton rose and strolled over to the window. His face was absorbed: it showed, however, no loss of composure, no trace of weakness or shrinking. From where he stood he began to speak, over his shoulder and without looking at his companion.

"I think I understand the complication of your position. You have made it very clear that Dulacq's cannot proceed to bring charges without proof because they may ruin their own business by so doing. Am I right?"

"That's the fact—in a nutshell."



"Your position is plain. But mine—I wonder if Mrs. Byrd has not been thinking of that? My claim to Shank is based largely on letters presented by this man Coles and on the testimony of his relative. Well, how does it strike you, Mr. Aylofffe—how would you feel in my place?"

He spoke quietly, but the other sprang to his feet. "This is dreadful, Sir Richard! I did not mean—no doubt of your honesty ever—"

"It isn't my honesty that is in question. I was wholly ignorant that any claim existed up to a few months ago. What you tell me is as new to me as the claim was."

"Men like Mr. Scrope, your solicitor, like Sir John Flippin the K.C., are not to be caught napping. They would not stand for you, Sir Richard, unless your claim were well-founded."

"I wish we could talk to Sir John."

"Unfortunately, he is still in Norway and doesn't return till next week. I called up his house this morning. But I insist," Aylofffe repeated vehemently, surprised and troubled by the expression upon Monkton's face, "that *this* aspect of the matter never crossed my thoughts—no, nor the Chief's."

"I am not so sure."

Richard appeared to be turning over some idea in his mind and his face had taken on an absent look, as of one making unspoken decisions. Aylofffe talked on, giving his views as to the necessity of staying under cover at present—but in a short time he saw that the other was not listening.

"All that is unimportant," Dick cut him short by announcing, "What is vital to me is the truth—Am I Monkton of Shank—Am I?"

"The people who say you are—Lady Monkton, Mr. Ventriss—do you not believe in them?"

"And Mr. Coles—do you believe in him?"

The dry finality of his tone caused Ayloffe to stare—it was not that of a boy at all.

"I can't deny—"

"You can't deny suspicion of forgery, murder and an attack on an innocent girl—those you can't deny. Well, they are enough!"

It was odd that Ayloffe too had thought Dick Monkton more docile than he proved to be. He foresaw complications in the young man's attitude, argued with him on the need for patience and passivity, for the moment, but argued in vain.

"You see," Dick said at length, "I have an idea. There does exist one person I can talk with. That I must do immediately. It may lead to a discovery. Let me think it over here in quiet awhile and when you come back, I will tell you what I have decided."

With this Ayloffe, though a good deal puzzled, was forced to be satisfied.



## CHAPTER XXXI

### CHINOISERIES

A FAIR summer day had been followed, as so often at this season, by a disquieting heaviness and heat. Over Shank the air fell lifeless; the deer under the trees drooped their heads, the doves in the eaves scarcely stirred, and the patter of drops from the fountain sounded nervously distinct. When Mr. Ventris's chauffeur brought the car round to the Guard-house, he wiped his brow and wondered why his master chose this day to go to London.

Mr. Ventris did not keep him waiting long. He made his appearance, dressed with his usual care and with more than his usual touch of theatrical effect, for he had thrown about his thin shoulders an ample cape which fell into sweeping folds. As he came out on the flags, Gapper approached with the mail. Mr. Ventris took the letters from him, glanced them through thrust several of them into his coat-pocket and handed the rest to Gapper to take into the house. Among them, the old gate-keeper had noticed one for Sir Richard and two

for Miss Lang, but they were not among those which Mr. Ventris had returned to him.....

Cloak adjusted, M. Charles made ready to start. He did not often drive himself, but today, he waved his chauffeur aside and took his place at the wheel. The car moved away, gathering speed and the driver did not look back.

Denise had not come down to the courtyard to see him off. She had remained upstairs in her boudoir and her state was one M. Charles did not like to think of. Of late, Denise had allowed her nerves to get the better of her with the result that he was beginning himself to feel almost unnerved. The scene she had just made him was absurd and tragic: she had acted as though this visit to London were an eternal parting. The frowning pallor of his face stiffened at the recollection of her wild words and wilder eye... Heavens! he had thought that such scenes were over for them years ago!

That hot-headed young fool of a Diccon, what an obstinate lad it was! Despite his anger a faint smile came into M. Charles's eyes. Well, fortune favored the young and he had got clean away after all. There seemed no question but that they two must make it up, somehow. His own judgment had been at fault, he had handled the youth badly. Opposition was never the way to handle a Monkton, he ought to have remembered how he got his way with Piers.....But the boy had irritated him with his quixotic folly—and after this last year no wonder he was less of a philosopher than formerly. And what a



young ass! Miss Lang indeed.....! The name brought other thoughts and M. Charles smiled no longer. His chauffeur, sitting beside him, was puzzled at the speed with which he took the high road, but when he glanced at the concentrated face, set mouth and pin-point pupils he dared not protest. No one employed by M. Charles ventured to protest when he looked like that.

Town was reached; M. Charles alighted at Monkton House and dismissed the car. After some time there, closeted with Andrews and writing letters, he emerged again—without the cloak this time, looked up and down the street and strolled into St. James's. Here he picked up a taxi, which drove him to the Sloane Square Station where he took the Underground to West Kensington, and walked thence to an address in Perham Road owned by a Mrs. McNeil. His manner as he traversed these respectable but dingy precincts resembled that which may be seen in a cat when he walks along a back-fence—it was both business-like and condescending...

M. Charles remained at the house in Perham Road for more than an hour. When he came out his manner had relaxed and was more at ease. He returned to Dover Street and there is no doubt that when he stood once more on the pavement of Mayfair he gave a gentle sigh of relief. Remaining errands were pleasanter and he lingered over them. His tailor was called on, in anticipation of autumn country visits, and the exact shades of leaf browns and delicate mauves and blues which must be sought for in matching

ties and so on occupied an agreeable hour in Bond Street. He lunched at his Club, which was empty enough. Few people were left in town at this season, but he met a friend, Lady Belphegor (of Baal Castle, finest collection of armor in Europe) and had tea with her. After tea he went back to his apartment and rang up Denise Monkton, speaking to her softly and reassuringly. When he replaced the telephone, the faint frown had returned to his forehead and he sat for some minutes over a cigarette.

Then, recalling a question which must be settled at Christie's, he strolled out again and turned into King Street. But he didn't go to Christie's that afternoon. The sight of a shop awning far down the pavement recalled to him something he had read in a letter he found awaiting him in town and he hurried on and turned into Spink's. M. Charles had an idea.

The hour was getting on to closing time; the shopman was thinking about the shutters, not expecting a customer on so hot an afternoon, unless it should be a stray American, who were notoriously energetic and troublesome when everybody else was out of town. But this exquisite and distinguished gentleman, so finished from silver head to slim feet, was evidently a Personage, not a tourist. So the shopman summoned Lancelot Ayloffé.

Ayloffé knew who it was at once. He had seen M. Charles many times though he had never talked with him. He came forward with a proper deference, but with a thrill of excitement. What



did the visit portend? Was it a move in the game or was it possible that M. Charles had come to lay his cards on the table—? And the Chief out of reach! The visitor spoke, in his suave, musical voice which was always a surprise at first. Ayloffé could hear the level beat of his own perfunctory accents as he said, "Quite so, sir," opening a vitrine meanwhile to show the customer a Renaissance pendant of which he had enquired the price. But M. Charles took small interest, as he explained, in the late Renaissance gold work. He was on the look-out for *chinoiseries*, really fine jades and crystals. Ayloffé ushered him into the inner room, spread a bit of velvet between them on the table and drew nearer a jewel-cabinet. There was not the space of two feet between him and M. Charles.....

"That's a lovely thing, indeed." The customer's long fingers played with the pendant. It was lovely: *fei t'sui*, of brilliancy almost equaling emerald; hung on black silk cord and set in diamonds. "Three hundred pounds, you say?"

"Guineas, sir—or this," and Ayloffé laid on the velvet strip a string of similar quality in carven beads—"at £350."

M. Charles disquisitioned gently and melodiously awhile on the new vogue of these ornaments. Meanwhile, his glance flitted about, lighting now here, now there. It was very quiet in the inner room. Suddenly his attention returned to the grave face of the salesman.

"Surely I have seen you before?"

"Very often," Ayloffé smilingly responded.

"You know me then?"

"Who, in the collector's world, does not know M. Charles?"

The other smiled also, gratified. "I remember now," he said, "We met at Dulacq's in Paris. Some years ago, I think. They exhibited some illuminated manuscripts, which chance to be a hobby of mine." He spoke with a modest condescension as though he were telling the other something he did not know. Ayloffé merely bowed.

"I will take the pendant."

He must, M. Charles reflected, make his peace with Denise and in all these years he had never given her a jewel. She could put it away until she wore colors again.

"Since you have honored us, let me have the pleasure of showing you some recent acquisitions," Ayloffé said quickly as the customer rose and he snapped on a light over a cabinet. M. Charles paused: the Egyptian figurines thus revealed were remarkably fine—an Anubis mounted in a black shrine immensely interested him. He began to talk about Charles Newton as he examined it. Then Ayloffé turned him toward a small group of bronzes. All the while he wondered. Was M. Charles off his guard?

"Has Sir Richard Monkton seen these? He told me he was coming in."

Meditatively while he spoke, M. Charles considered the votive bronze.

"We have not, I think, had the pleasure—"

"He'll probably appear in a day or two. These



things fascinate him. When he does, ring me up and I shall tell him what to look at."

Skilfully, M. Charles replaced the bronze among others on the shelf. Ayloffé replied that he should be delighted. The remark steadied him and he drew breath. The shop-man hovered about looking sulkier and sulkier for it was past closing-time and the customer showed no signs of departure. Instead he had fallen into playful talk about Dulacq's and sales in Paris, past and to come. Whenever the current showed signs of slackening, Ayloffé gave it some new and flattering impetus. He reminded M. Charles of his cleverness in discovering the Treyze Hystoires..

Then.....

"We do not here, as you know, deal in manuscripts," he said, moving to a table-drawer, "but one or two of our clients still ask us to keep on the look-out. Yesterday I picked this up quite unexpectedly. What do you think of it?"

He laid the Virgil with the silver clasps between them on the table and he was careful not to look at the other as he did so. Thus he felt rather than saw that, with the first glance at the volume, M. Charles pointed like a dog. Ayloffé ran on, bending over the manuscript. "I found it in Southampton—in an old shop there. The owner knew enough to ask a good price. The temptation, sir," he concluded with a pleasant little laugh, "is to ask you to tell me how much I have been cheated!"

M. Charles picked up the Virgil, set eyeglass

in eye and looked it through. No page quivered in his steady hand.

"You people always think that if you know about one thing, you know about another," he observed good-naturedly. "I've spent my life over manuscripts and even I get taken in at times. This is fair—a good, but not a remarkable specimen. What is your price?"

"We purchased it for a customer, sir, I am not sure—"

"I rather like the initials: it would fit into my collection. . . . . Would two hundred pounds do?"

Ayloffe respectfully repeated that the Virgil had been a commission—he would ask his client—M. Charles would readily see that he was bound but—?

Meanwhile M. Charles kept turning the pages; but what he saw thereon was merely a row of figures. The pendant had been an extravagance—but this! Of course, there was the great sale coming off in a few weeks when large sums were possible; but M. Charles knew enough about payments to know that when possible they were unlikely, when probable they were only possible; when certain next Monday they were likely to occur next month. . . . . And why should he buy this after all. . . . .? Southampton was on the railroad which ran past Shank. . . . .

He laid it down. "You might let me know," he said putting up his eyeglasses, "what your client thinks of the offer. Although I am not disposed to go higher—as a matter of fact I am selling rather than buying just now, as you may



have heard. Do you think the Southampton place had anything else worth looking at?"

"I am not expert enough, sir, to know," Ayloffe answered him deferentially, "he had a number of old things and he seemed rather ignorant about them."

"Quite so. Do you mind giving me the name?"

Ayloffe gave it readily: replaced the Virgil, locked the drawer, and bowed his distinguished client into King street. As M. Charles hurried off, Ayloffe saw him looking at his watch. He himself lingered but an instant to give the order for closing, then upstairs, three steps at a time to Dick Monkton's room.

"I've got you your chance," he said gravely as he entered, "M. Charles has been here—on your trail, plain enough. Oh he's a wonder—what a voice, what a personality! But I've sent him off on a wild-goose chase to Southampton, which will take him all of twenty-four hours, and if you wish to get the night train to Scotland, it's now or never, my lad!"

## CHAPTER XXXII

### LANGFORD'S

**S**TONEHAVEN lies in a cleft of the hills fronting the North Sea. The town is well named with its stone houses and stony streets, its harbor filled with fishing-boats returned from an ocean grey as granite. Clean winds blow through it adding a tang of salt to the lingering smell of hides and fish. Beyond the town, the road climbs over treeless hills toward a wide and smiling country, upon which, on a clear morning the purple highlands look down. Scotland here—about is dauntless and romantic and keeps its outland look even in the sunniest valleys.

Along the unsheltered road walked Dick Monkton, newly set down from Aberdeen. He looked about him as he went, but without pleasure, more as one seeking an address than as a traveller in a new country. His mind was busy among the various recent events and their discussion in his long talks with Ayloff. These talks had taken a friendly and unfettered turn, for Ayloff had been quick to see the advantages accruing to his own position from an ally like Monkton,



whether of Shank or no. If he were Sir Richard then his influence would be all powerful for the future. If not, if he were only the victim of fraud, then that circumstance provided a practical lightning-rod to carry off the storm. The case would be *cause célèbre* and under the shadow of its importance, matters concerning Dulacq's might well be quietly settled in the right way. The greater wrong would obscure the less. Dulacq's would have an opportunity to see that the forgers, whoever they were should not repeat the offence; the suspected manuscripts might be privately acquired and disposed of and the tide which bore the spoils of the old world to the shores of the new would have no serious ebb. Ayloffe therefore was deeply concerned in the truth.

As for Monkton himself, he was full of pain and doubt; the bitterness of suspicion; incredulity, which returned hope to him at intervals and above all the longing for Jean. He had taken train for Scotland with the determination to see and cross-examine the old nurse Jean had told him of, and who, he felt convinced, was probably the one witness now living to the past situation at Shank. For even if "Biddy," as Jean called her, had left her service there before those last months of tragedy, yet at least the knowledge she possessed must be of a nature to throw light upon the story of Lucy Monkton.

Langford's was a mile or so outside of Stonehaven—a white, low-browed building, half-cottage, half-farmhouse, with small windows and a steep roof, with rambling outhouses and neat

yard while all about it, growing up against the walls and gates, were borders of brilliant flowers. John Lang, the historian, who was born in Aberdeen, had inherited the house, its policies and plantations, which he loved with a great love. In later life he had been able to add and improve and although of course obliged to live in Edinburgh during term-time, he always regarded Langford's as home. Hither, after his death, his widow took up her residence, living quietly, much liked and getting many letters from Jean at Shank.

A country girl admitted the visitor not without astonishment—for at Langford's strangers were rare. Monkton was shown into a homely and rather shabby sitting-room, with a bow-window which opened upon the drive-way. He had but a few minutes to look about him—there were pictures and weeklies and reviews as well as books, while a door gave glimpses of a shelf-lined study with its desk lovingly ordered and looking as though the owner had just stepped out of it for an hour or so. But he was not kept waiting long—his name brought Mrs. Lang down in a trice.

"It will be Jean you're wanting to see I'm thinking, Sir Richard," was her greeting as she hurried toward him across the room, "and I'm so sorry! but she's not here yet."

She was very attractive. One's first feeling was that she was on the whole more attractive than her daughter, although she was much more decidedly Scots in accent and in appearance. Mrs.



Lang was not tall, with thick, curly hair, once darker than Jean's, now grey; an active and restless vigor of step and movement and a sensitive mouth. Her eyes were true brown, unlike Jean's. At the moment they looked rather worried—not knowing what this visit might portend. Jeanie's letter from York had certainly been unusually brief.

"You've heard from Miss Lang of course—lately, I mean," was all Monkton could think of to say at the moment.

"Ay—I'd a letter from York. She's motoring here on her holiday—with her friend an American lady. They ought to be coming in by to-morrow or next day: 'twill be by way of Perth, I fancy—But there's nothing wrong you're hiding, Sir Richard? You're not bringing me ill news?" She spoke in a soft voice, but her eyes were anxious and he hastened to reassure her. He knew of nothing wrong: he had hoped to find Miss Lang at home as he had a favor to ask of her and her mother and it involved something—He didn't know if Mrs. Lang had heard—?

The embarrassment and constraint in his speech and manner showed Mrs. Lang that his errand concerned his own affairs and not her's or her daughter's. Relieved, although still serious, she motioned him to a chair and perched on another herself near-by. It was plain to see that she never sat on any chair for very long at a time, and that her walk was less of a walk than a series of short runs.

"Perhaps you have heard about my claim to the baronetcy of Shank?"

Immediately her face cleared.

"To be sure. A wonderfully romantic story—Jean told us; and we read it in the papers, too. You're the fortunate youth, I'm thinking!" She smiled at him but inwardly her thoughts ran: "What a troubled and bewildered laddie it is! I'm wondering if there's anything in it?"

Evidently it was best to be open with Mrs. Lang. She had the look of one who has lived long with scholars—a look that sees below the surface and knows that what has been once is like to be again. So Dick told her simply that he was anxious to obtain every possible evidence in regard to the last year of Lucy Monkton's life—that he had learned from Miss Lang about the presence in her mother's house of a servant who had been at Shank during that year and who might therefore furnish him with valuable information relating to the circumstances of Lady Monkton's—his mother's, marriage and death.

"You will be meaning Biddy, no doubt," was Mrs. Lang's comment: "Yes. Jean wrote me a letter about asking Biddy particulars of that past time—the wedding and all. I did what I could and answered her. But my letter must have crossed her's, telling me of her leaving Shank on her holiday. It was a thought sudden, Jean's vacation—now, wasn't it? She had not expected to have it so soon?"

Dick said he believed it was: somehow he felt that Jean would prefer to tell her mother herself



about the circumstances under which she left Shank.

"I wrote what I could. But Biddy, poor soul, has been very bad with influenza and it was hard for her. Truth to tell, Sir Richard, we've never quite known what it was that chanced to Biddy when she was in service at that Great House—It must have been something—I've my own ideas; but I've not talked of them."

"Did she come direct to you from there?"

"No: no indeed. Not for three or four years. She was long, long in my house ere we even knew she had had a place at Shank. She married, you see, shortly afterwards, a foreigner, French I'm thinking—and he was killed in an accident a year later. Biddy had a friend in Edinburgh—she came there in search of a place and so she came to me. Jeanie was but a wee baby and Biddy was aye fond of children."

"And you say you have your own idea as to what happened?"

"It was a fright, Sir Richard, whatever caused it. Biddy was frightened at Shank. She's frightened now to think of it. She hates the place. She cried when Jean would go there. She said it was unlucky. She never knew, poor dear, that it was her own tales of the beauty and glory of the collection, of the gauds and the pictures and the ancientry that made Jean fair wild to go!" A smile flickered into Mrs. Lang's eyes. "Jeanie would be like that," she added.

"And you never questioned her?"

"Who would be questioning her? It was her

own business. She did her work and she was faithful. When trouble came Biddy stayed by. Who would be questioning her?"

"But the other day you did?"

"Truly. I did as Jean asked—though it was hard. She had been so very, very ill and she is so weak still. But I asked her if she remembered hearing aught of Sir Piers' wedding the young lady and what his bride wore. And she said none knew better than she, who was there herself and dressed her—putting her hat and cloak upon her. For Miss Vignoles (so Biddy said) would not be dressed as brides are in white with a veil. She was freakish and would wear naught but her travelling-dress, despite what they could do."

Dick heard what he expected to hear and stiffened. "She said no more?" he asked further: and Mrs. Lang shook her head.

"That look came again into her face that always comes when we mention that time and she cried out to me: 'Why do I keep bothering her about those dreadful days which she so longed to forget?' So of course I did my best to soothe the poor soul."

In his absorption, Monkton rose and walked over to the window, looking out upon a picture imprinted ever after on his memory in clear bright, banal colors. The clipped circle of turf, the yellow and scarlet flowers in the beds, the flowering shrubs against the wall, the line of trees rising above them—. He looked and looked yet what he saw was something quite different—the face of a young, tormented woman, stum-



bling, running wildly across the Park away from the towers of Henry VIII with their gilded vanes and carrying an infant in her arms.

"I must see her, Mrs. Lang. What you tell me makes it an absolute necessity that I should see her."

"The doctor says she's very weak—very weak still," Mrs. Lang replied doubtfully, "and I'm not liking to distress her, Sir Richard."

"I'm afraid—I feel I ought to tell you, the law is likely to do it if I don't. And I shall not question her about anything that concerns herself," he protested, "she is safe from me as far as that goes—. Surely, surely it were better she answered my few questions quietly now rather than have to do so to the police later—because, Mrs. Lang, don't you see? the matter is vital. There are witnesses whose evidence must be supported. Biddy may know nothing and I shall in that case protect her. But what Biddy knows may decide whether I am or am not Monkton of Shank."

He was likeable, Mrs. Lang thought, and her reluctance could not stand against his earnestness and his need.

"I will have to see what I can do," was her conclusion, "wait here, Sir Richard, and I will return."

She was gone a long while; nearly an hour in which Richard's suspense seemed to hang like a veritable oppression upon the atmosphere—a heavy weight which even hope could not lift. After awhile he heard her step but when she re-entered the room it seemed to him that her re-

luctance had been deepened and intensified, transferred in fact from the side of Biddy to himself. Her face was very grave. "You had best come upstairs," was all she said and turned abruptly so that he should follow. They climbed two flights in silence and then with her hand on a knob, she spoke.

"My dear boy," said she and there was a new note in her voice, "be gentle with her—be careful—and oh! don't be harsh with her!"

At the words she opened the door of a small, neat chamber, its occupant lying in bed under an old-fashioned counterpane and a gay little bunch of marigolds on the window-sill. This was the first thing Richard saw. The second was the face of a woman, bloodless and strained, whose eyes were turned with an awful apprehension toward the door. He went in.

Mrs. Lang shut the door after him and went downstairs again with her rapid step. She paused at the entrance to the house; looked up and down the drive with a concentration of intense anxiety. She went into the sitting-room, emptied the vase of flowers and forgot to put in fresh ones. She hastened to the kitchen and spoke, rather sharply, to Ellen about the dinner. She went into the study, picked up her knitting and knit a row furiously. She often did this in those dead days, when John was *just* finishing a page and she could hardly wait to speak to him. But now even knitting hardly answered. She laid it down and listened. Silence.

Mrs. Lang was a good woman, though not es-



pecially devout. But at this moment all her being was centred on that interview and it took on an intensity to her mind which was very like prayer. She found herself praying to the click of her needles, praying and listening. For a long time nothing happened, till the shadows began to walk across the grass plot and late sunbeams parted the curtains of the southerly window.

When she heard footsteps descending she was in the hall in a flash and uplifted a quivering face to Monkton which he saw as through a mist. He moved deliberately; he carried his head high, but when she gave him her hand he gripped and clung to it.

"My poor lad!" was all she could say and drew him into the study, which seemed to her the fitting place.

"It's hard luck, isn't it?" he asked her.

"'Tis infamous—but oh! take heart. Believe an old woman—there are better things!"

He laughed a little. That seemed to him almost funny: that she should think there were better things! But she was going on in an accent of hurrying sympathy. "I feared it—I won't deny I feared something wrong from the first.... She had seemed so terribly upset by the papers when they first told about you. She seemed to brood—the doctor said she had something on her mind. But perhaps there's a doubt still?"

He shook his head. There was no doubt. What had come to him in that room had been gasped out in the deadly certainty of terror.

"And what are you going to do now?"

Richard was just about to answer her that he hardly knew; that he must think; when both of them were struck by an unexpected and significant sound—that of a motor entering the drive. The dread of some stranger coming in to find him looking like that, gave her a sudden motherly impulse of protection and she drew him quickly from the window. But not before Dick had seen. The motor had stopped before the house and a man was getting out. There was no mistaking that distinguished bearing and the long, graceful cloak.

Luckily, Mrs. Lang was quick of eye and act. She sprang forward to shut the door between the study and the drawing-room and in another instant, while the door-bell was ringing in the house, she had unlocked the long window that opened on the back garden.

“You can reach the high-road by yon path across the policy,” she told him. “Go, go quickly,” and then she added with a twist in her smile, “God be with you!”

Dick stood an instant; memory thrilled through him of a face between two tall candle-flames. He feared for her.

“You don’t mind talking to him?” he hesitated, “you don’t mind?”

“Why would I be afraid of him?” she cried; “I’m not afraid!”

She gave him a little pat on the shoulder and then stooped and flew like a bird toward the other room. He waited until the door had closed upon her and then let himself out of the window on the garden path, into the cool afternoon.



## CHAPTER XXXIII

### DUNOTTAR CASTLE

**W**HEN he reached the high-road, Dick mechanically turned his steps toward the town. He walked quickly, not that there was any reason for haste but simply to ease the tension of his thoughts. These were wholly cast back into the room he had just quitted. What was that white-faced woman gasping to Charles Ventriss and what was Charles Ventriss saying to Mrs. Lang?

The afternoon enfolded him with soft air and a mild glow of declining sunshine. Light wind rustled the hedges and touched his hot face with its cool current. Dick mended his pace, the town was near, in the hollow below, and he wanted to seek refuge in its lonelier bye-ways. The interview at Langford's was not likely to be prolonged: M. Charles would be returning and oh! he could not now meet M. Charles. . . . . The very thought brought pain.

Descending into the clean, stony street, he found himself at harbor level, and stood for a moment to watch the flapping fisher-boats and

the slow, sturdy men moving about many tasks. There was a lifted horizon smudged with purple, that betokened wind, and already the hair of the children playing on the quay was stirred and blown.....He must not pause long, for fear—The curved bridge led the road away to mount another hill beside the sea.

What a horrible, horrible fiasco! One must look it in the face—one must realize—how wantonly Destiny had played with him. He supposed that they had fancied him a mere nullity who, once entangled, would never dare to assert himself, who would never resist the glories of the world they had shown him. Even now, with Biddy's signed statement in his pocket, Dick knew perfectly well that he and M. Charles could bluff the matter through. Biddy would never speak: fear held Biddy by the throat and she asked only to have that grip relaxed. No doubt M. Charles was seeking for him everywhere, M. Charles with all the tempting power of personality which he knew so well how to use, with his golden voice, his distinction, his affection. In this heightened moment of illumination, Dick could see it all so clearly! Even the last great gift might be thrown into the scale, the way to joy might be made smooth: the way to Jean. Oh he could see it all!

And on the other side? Why, his situation was desperate, he was in plain words, ruined. The clothes on his back—the contents of the suitcase he had checked at the station, constituted practically everything he had in the world. He was



in a distant country: his money spent; and worse than friendless since he bore upon him the stigma of fraud. Even if he could, as he hoped, convince a man like Flippin of his innocence, could point back to his own hesitation and reluctance even, in snatching at the fruits of his claim, yet the world at large would know him only as another spurious Claimant, the central figure in a criminal conspiracy. The fact that he himself had unveiled this conspiracy, and refused—as he knew he did refuse—to profit by it, would not modify harsh opinion to any real extent. The Consulate might ship him home for pity but scandal would cling to him like a taint. The Trust Company indeed! Why, it would no more employ the hero of such a story than the Bank of England would have hired Sir Roger Tichborne!

Dick forgot that Tichborne was a convicted perjurer—bitterness, not reason, made the comparison. For after all, what had he done? He pounded this question into every step of the way. There was no answer. The whole affair stupefied him anyhow. Even now he could not decide whether M. Charles were the deceiver or the deceived.

By this time the hill was climbed and he had walked for some distance along its crest leaving the town behind. A baker's cart rattled by, otherwise the road was empty. The sun rested on the rim of distant hills, a western bulwark on which he looked, not knowing their names. These hills, the Braes of Angus, reminded Dick of the painted hills in the Canticles miniature, whose

round tops were flooded with sunshine. Once more his mind winced from pain.....

Ahead of him to the left, he perceived that a peninsula of rock, detached from the cliff, thrust itself into a battering sea. On the top there looked to be a sort of ruin which caught his attention. First, the heavy mass of a keep was outlined against the sky: smaller buildings were grouped at its foot, some roofless and with green grass between; fragments of a mighty wall still defended the whole. Surely a strong fortress had once looked seaward! Now the waves tore at it and worried it, threw masses of spray high to drench it; withdrew with grinding teeth, returned with fresh assault..... The young man paused to gaze upon this strange and picturesque place; and soon spied a path which led to it across the fields from a turnstile at the road's edge.

The walk was longer than appeared and much rougher; dipped steeply down between the shaly cliffs and climbed up again to where the massive wall still spanned the chasm. Here was a ruined arch and a door which stood open, while within, the entrance to an old guard-house showed as black and blank as the mouth of a cave. The place was quite deserted.

In a few minutes he found himself standing in what had been the castle courtyard now overgrown with turf showing strangely green upon the barren rock. Flocks of sea-birds flapped and swooped over it, crying aloud as they came and went. Dick sat down on the ruin of the castle well to rest; the place fitted his mood. Most of



the ruin was mere heaps of rock, not easily told from the underlying cliff. He could mark the chapel ground-plan by its sequence of broken pillars; few of the outbuildings had more than one story left, and through their crevices and breaches the wind poured and fluted. He sat for long and long till he was chilled in it, staring out on the North Sea.

A green and cruel sea, a deadly cold, uneasy sea. An old saying came into his mind. "Der Nord See ist der Mord See." That stretch of wild water getting up into wrath of foam under the night-wind—how thick the dead lay under it! He had not seen it since the time when submarines lurked beneath and grey battleships tramped its floor and guns roared on its borders—a horrible sea.....He thought of the strange, fierce men who had held this castle in the old days and thinking, leaned against a heap of stones and looked—looked—.

By and by Dick realized the sun was gone; he was cold and very tired. There was nothing for it, he supposed, but to go back to Stonehaven for the night. Yet he hesitated, for he hated the town and the frowsy lodging which would be all he could afford, if indeed he could afford that. He would have but little left when the return fare to London had been paid.....Cold as this was, somehow he felt more at home in this desolate place, which yet stood so sturdily against water and wind. There was a loft to the keep and with some faint hope in his mind of shelter there he ran up to it. Great breaches in the walls freely

admitted the air, but the roof still held and more than half of the space was heaped with hay. Evidently the harvest of the courtyard had been stacked here to keep dry so that the air was still sweet and fragrant with clover. Dick had no hesitation; at the sight his weariness overcame him. Chilled and miserable he crept into the heart of the heap and burrowed there. He spread the hay over him, rolled up his coat for a pillow and soon in the warmth his limbs relaxed, his mind moved drowsily among his perplexities and he fell asleep.

He was awakened by the loud roaring of the tide against the rocks. Dawn, barred with gold and red, chilly with autumn wind welcomed him without. Below, the ocean tore with vehemency at the foundations of his refuge and threw its spray to the height of the keep. Yet Dick felt reluctant to leave the ruin which had sheltered him so kindly. Not till long after did he learn the name of it, how the regalia of Scotland had been hidden there in olden wars and how, in the hollow crypt where the waves beat, Covenanters had been imprisoned. Perhaps it was well that he did not know of the ghosts said to haunt the chamber below that wherein he slept. This rest had heartened and steadied him. There was that in the brave, windy, atmosphere of the place seemed to speak of courage and hope again. What he had to face he should face better for his stay there.

Since it was yet too early for anyone to be bothering, Dick clambered down to the sea's edge for



a dip. He found it rare and cold, no place for swimming. The bath started his blood running and made him remember a bun in the pocket of his coat left from yesterday's lunch, which he had been too miserable to think of the night before. This morning he munched it and wished it had been bigger. While he munched he made a plan that he would buy another or a sandwich and a cup of coffee in Stonehaven and thence trudge back to Aberdeen on foot. The distance was a scant fifteen miles: he could take this whole pleasant day to it and catch the night train to London. There he would take counsel with Ayloffe and beyond that it were best not to look.

So absorbed was Dick, sitting on a broken pillar-shaft in the ruined courtyard of Dunottar Castle that his gaze never turned to the mainland and thus he never noticed a motor-car which had stopped on the top of the hill, over against the turn-stile. The occupants of this car were two ladies, one of whom busied herself on some matter by the roadside, while the other took the path seawards, toward the ruin. Her young, light shape was outlined for a time against the sky, but Dick never looked that way. And thus it was that under the shadow of the archway they met face to face.

Had it been at any other place or any other time in their history no doubt this meeting would have been like other meetings: "How strange to see you here, Sir Richard!" and "How are you, Miss Lang?"

But what Jean saw in the haggard face before

her, in the brave, troubled eyes, brought all the love without disguise into her own. She stood still, there in the path and Dick with a gasp came up to her and took her in his arms. All his disappointment and bitterness and apprehension swept him toward her as to the one thing that could help. If she were there nothing mattered and he called her name over and over again with a passion of trust and reliance. He dropped his face to her shoulder and she could hear his heart.

"Oh Jean," he cried, "Oh Jean dearest! How I've longed for you! How I've needed you!"

"I know," she murmured, "I know."

"Oh Jean!" said he again and then it all came out. "I've been to Langford's and I've talked with Biddy and—we were right to suspect what we did. . . . . It's all up with me, Jean, I'm a beggar and worse—because—you never guessed, darling—did you? but Biddy is the real Mary McNeil!"

If Mrs. Byrd thought her friend showed a singular indifference to her breakfast, she did not say so when her sharp eyes observed Jean's companion. Instead she greeted him composedly with a "Good morning, Sir Richard," which Jean at once corrected.

"He *not* Sir Richard, Georgie after all! He's not Monkton of Shank—he's just Monkton. . . . ."

". . . . . of Philadelphia," Dick suggested, but his smile was cheerful.

Mrs. Byrd did not look surprised, but then Mrs. Byrd seldom did. She had been occupied in setting out by the roadside the materials which she



carried in thermos flasks and sandwich cases. The aroma of her coffee machine rose into the air. Mrs. Byrd whipped off the apron which had protected a becoming travelling frock; wiped her hands and resumed her rings. Then she waved her companions to table and took up the coffee-pot.

"Yes, I know it's only two miles to the hotel," she observed, pouring and serving, "but what I've seen of 'em in Scotland makes me prefer 'God's green caravanserai'. So the jig is up, is it? You don't say? I suppose you've something definite to go on, now, have you? You needn't mind me—the damned thing, unfortunately, is my profession. Did Lance tell you?"

"He kept calling you the Chief—"

"That's just his little literary way," said Mrs. Byrd apologetically, "he studied under Dr. Doyle—Conan I mean, and he likes that method. . . . . Yes, it seems a funny profession for a lady, doesn't it? But it isn't always as blind and futile as this case makes it. . . . . The trouble with this case, you see, is politics and business and society and all pulling me different ways. It's like tying a man hand and foot and then giving him a gun to shoot a grizzly! But go on, my young friend, and tell me all about it."

Dick complied. The narrative was supposedly addressed to the detective, but all the while the teller looked devouringly at Jean. When he finished, Mrs. Byrd asked only one question:

"You say Charles Ventris was here yesterday?"

H'm.....Jeanie, my lamb, get busy because we'll have to be moving on."

Jean made some incoherent observation about wanting to be sure what Mr. Monkton's plans were. She looked handsome and sensitive and foolish, her eyes were full of light and her cheeks of color; but her friend's crisp command expected nothing but obedience. In a few minutes the basket was packed and Mrs. Byrd took the wheel.

"Get in, children!" she ordered and as they still hesitated she continued, with impatience—"There's plenty of time to discuss Mr. Monkton's plans later.....just now we've work to do. I've got to get to the telegraph office as quick as I can. Then we'll go on to your mother's, Jeanie my lamb, to hear what's happened there, for after that, this young man and I will have to be getting back to town."



## CHAPTER XXXIV

### CHRISTIE'S

ON the way back to London in the train, Mrs. Byrd discussed frankly with Dick certain aspects of the affair and of her part as investigator therein. There were other aspects on which she scarcely touched and he was reluctant to question her. They had the carriage to themselves and she sat in her corner a smart, alert figure, well-appointed, leisurely, yet with the latent energy of her countryfolk, and Dick had hard work to convince himself of her profession. As to her work in the case in hand she was frankness itself, speaking of it as "one of my most brilliant failures!"

"Of course I feel badly about it," she explained, "because there's no doubt I sent Stern to his death. You see, after we traced the centre of activity to Shank, I became convinced that search would show up some traces of the place where forged antiques were made—if made they were. I had doped out that stair behind the cartoon from some old plans I found and I assumed there would be a quiet way in and out, useful to the

gang who were running things.....Somebody caught Stern spying around; and there was a fight and he was shot. When I got down there I saw at once that all that part of the building was far too dark for work so delicate as illuminating and that a secret exit must be near the workshop. So if it wasn't down it was bound to be up that little stair, and so I told my lamb..... what I stuck in that letter beside my address was a £5 note and a key—and it was lucky I did!...”

“It was nothing else but plain commonsense,” she added apologetically, “which made me guess that you would lose no time in obeying my letter and that they would do their best to stop you.... And there was no better way of stopping you than by stealing your money. So that's why I told Lance you wouldn't have any. No miraculous insight about that.....but as we were saying—that was just plain commonsense.....

“Well, the inquest showed me there wasn't a mite of evidence to make an arrest. The only really shady folks concerned had an unshakeable alibi. The scrap of parchment Jeanie picked up proved no more than we knew already—that somebody in Shank had done the shooting..... Oh, of course you've read detective novels, haven't you? And they always provide clues, don't they? I ought to have identified hair out of the dust of a century—and finger-prints on those granite walls—and footprints on the flags, which didn't retain any! Yes: but that's where the novelist has the advantage of us, my boy. Lots



of crimes occur leaving no clues at all and don't you forget it."

"You have suspicions, though, surely?"

"My dear young friend," she observed tranquilly, "one doesn't create a large international scandal and send several people into bankruptcy on a suspicion—it isn't pretty and besides. . . . . I'm not the Yard, you know! If you talk to my friend Peter Godston—(you did once I think, and he took quite a shine to you) you'll find that he thinks all this talk about forged manuscripts is rot. He doesn't believe in it and his theory is that Stern was killed in a plain fight, being where he had no business to be, by somebody who is too scared to talk. If that's the Yard's view, what am I to do? I'm just a consulting specialist who knows something about old truck and I've been retained by the Dulacqs to see that whatever happens *they* don't suffer. The rest is England and England's business."

"But there's me, there's my case," said Dick quietly, "Surely *that* gives you something to go on?"

"Oh *now* you're talking," she answered, "and that's why you and I are hurrying back to London and leaving Jeanie behind." She paused and glanced at his serious face. "It's a bad, black business," she added.

"Have you any theory?" he asked and she answered him readily, her blue eyes fixed on the passing scenery of Yorkshire.

"There are facts, of course, and theories to be formed from them. My feeling is that the whole

thing grew out of somebody's hearing you were marked with those Monkton peculiarities—the nick in the ear, the twist in the eyebrows. I find in the old records that the Monktons have always had 'em, the cadet branch as well as the Shank line. Nobody liked Lycett Monkton and there's a motive. . . . . Was M. Charles played upon by somebody who knew his feeling? That's what I wonder."

"He must have been," Dick muttered, "he must have been. You think he is deceived—don't you?"

"I don't know," she answered flatly, "I know how it all might come about—and nothing more. I guess it's easier to forge letters than manuscripts, when all's said. Undoubtedly they hunted for Mary McNeil and old Biddy was well hidden. So when they couldn't find the real McNeil, they supplied a false one—or Coles did. . . . . I hate that Coles man with his twisted head!" she broke out, "the Lord in Heaven might testify to his alibi and yet I'd believe he was in it! I feel it somehow and that means," she relaxed into a laugh, "that I'm a female first, last and all the time."

"But surely there's something definite in this chaos. Surely McNeil can be arrested?"

Mrs. Byrd once more stared tranquilly out of the window. "Oh yes," she replied placidly, "She can be and no doubt in time she will be. Tampering with the Baronetage is not a favorite occupation in England and she'll find it out. But if you ask am I going to have her picked up—why should I? From my point of view they all stand



in a row like bricks—Coles and Hays and McNeil, M. Charles and Lady Monkton, M. Jerome and M. Anatole and Lancelot and you and God knows who else. Knock one down and they all go.”

“And Lady Monkton?” he choked in horror, “You think that Lady Monkton—?”

Mrs. Byrd answered him with a shake of the head. “The Lord be merciful to my sex,” she remarked after a pause, “if only for what they will do to help a man they love. I’ve nothing against Lady Monkton except that she is unmarried to Charles Ventris.”

“Then,” said Dick in despair, “what are you going to do?”

“I am going to lunch,” said Mrs. Byrd firmly, “and so are you. Pull that basket out from the pile, there’s a good boy—there’s more in it than scones I tell you—” And she refused to say anything more for all the rest of their journey.

Two days later Dick accompanied by Ayloffé was summoned to her lodging in Half Moon Street. As they went upstairs to her sitting-room they encountered a large individual coming down who was immediately recognized by Richard as Inspector Godston.

“Glad to see you,” the latter observed; and when he added, “Don’t fail to call on me if you need help,” Dick realized matters must be moving toward a crisis.

They found the Chief seated at her desk with several telegrams and letters before her and she gave them a concentrated greeting. “I can give you only a few minutes,” said she, with a glance

at her watch, "as I'm expecting rather an important interview. But first of all I want to tell you, Richard, that Sir John Flippin will be back in town tomorrow evening. He will send for you after I've talked with him and then we shall see. Keep yourself out of sight meanwhile; M. Charles is combing London for you as I happen to know."

She paused, shifted the papers before her and then turned round upon them her eyes flashing like the diamonds edging her wrist-watch.

"I tell you, Lance, I'm getting tired of having my hands tied by these respected partners of yours. The whole case has been a mere tissue of assumptions and suspicions and I'm given no chance to turn these into proofs.....Apparently, manuscript forgery is a question for experts anyhow and they don't agree at that..... I have here—" she pounded the desk, "three separate opinions contradicting one another, and even Jerome Dulacq doesn't seem wild to commit himself."

Ayloffé looked quite miserable. "I know," he assented—"but think—!"

"It's more than they are doing. Here's this sale at Christie's coming off in a day or two and His Grace the Duke of Bradford is likely to spend a lot of money. Is that a time for shilly-shally? Yet here is Jerome Dulacq," she shook a paper at them, "gibbering at me—yes, I said gibbering—in a series of frantic cablegrams about the effect on the market and the danger of trying to expose anybody!"

"Then what can we do?"



The lady once more seemed to immerse herself in a mass of notes and Ayloffe was forced to wait until she raised her head. "Only one thing—and that you're not to mention. I've sent to Paris for Anatole Dulacq—he has more sense than Jerome . . . . . I shall talk to him and tell him my plan . . . . . I don't think that he will expect me to make an omelette without breaking eggs."

"When will he appear?"

She looked at him. "Today I hope . . . . . but I am not certain. Meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile, Chief, what the devil am I to do? Am I to bid? Am I not to bid? Suppose a doubt is thrown, will my clients back out and leave me to pay for the Godolphin Choral? Do you see my position?"

"I see it, Lance," she composedly returned, "but it's not my affair. If Dulacq's had given me a free hand I might advise you. As it is, I don't buy manuscripts. That's your business."

"But won't you tell me anything more?" he entreated, "you spoke of having a plan—" but she merely looked at him with a firm, polite refusal and once more bent over her desk. Ayloffe rose, but asked one more question as he started to leave the room.

"Shall I catch the measles, Chief, and stay away from the sale altogether?"

Mrs. Byrd then condescended a final word. "Go, go, by all means, my dear boy! If only as a spectacle of human frailty, I think you'll find it highly repaying . . . . ."

And with this philosophic suggestion the harassed Aylofffe was forced to be content.

Dick had hard work in persuading Aylofffe to let him go also to the sale and succeeded only after evolving a sort of disguise, not too theatrical in aspect. Moustaches broadened his thin face while hat and muffler showed as little of it as possible. He entered the Great Rooms some paces behind his friend, followed him discreetly to the inner room taking his own seat in an obscure corner. The chamber where the sale was to take place was already half filled—he saw one or two men he knew—old Sir Peter was there as usual, wagging his white eye-brows. On the dais a lectern had been placed and the Canticles lay open at the fourth Miniature. A soft, delicate splendor arose from its open pages and men hovered respectfully over it as if around a king. Smaller specimens, like courtiers, were grouped about. The lighting of the place was skilful and adequate to display these objects, for it fell directly upon them, but Dick noticed that it made harsh the faces of men.

After a few minutes he saw M. Charles, at whose entry heads were turned and who paused awhile over old Sir Peter's chair. Dick looked rather longingly, even a little bitterly, upon him. How finely chiselled that sculptured face of his—now wreathed in smiles—how distinguished his tall grace! He had a friend linked by the arm and now they paused at the lectern and made as it were an obeisance. . . . . M. Charles's white hand fluttered over the page, indicating, expounding



— He leaned a moment over his treasure and looked abroad at the room now almost filled. Dick turned his glance aside. When he looked back the Auctioneer was standing in his place and M. Charles had taken his seat at one side, where his back was toward Dick. The sale began.

From the very first, bidding was brisk and prices started at a high level. Plainly the men present were almost all practically interested and the number of those present only from curiosity was comparatively small. Agents of all the great firms dealing in such rarities had hastened from Paris, Rome, New York and Buenos Aires. Although none of the manuscripts came from the Shank collections and all of them were the private property of Charles Ventriss, it was evident they shared the *cachet* of that great library. Dick had gone over the catalogue with Ayloffé and knew that the first five or six numbers bore an unquestioned reputation with a pedigree running unbroken to their original monastery collections. M. Charles had purchased them openly at sales in Paris and in Russia years before. Dick therefore expected no questioning and was glad to see that Ayloffé secured two coveted volumes for his firm.....if at prices nearly double those which had been paid at their last sale. If Dick was pleased, M. Charles was plainly pleased also—things were indeed going well. Then the hush came. The Canticles was introduced.

“I do not need to tell those gentlemen who have examined this work of art,” the auctioneer was saying, “that no more perfect example of minia-

ture painting has ever come into the market. Mr. Ventris, whose authority you all know, has declared that in all his long experience these four miniatures are the highest specimens of fifteenth century Italian art that have ever passed into his hands. The paintings are far finer than those of the famous Silvestro Fiorentino, whose skill especially delighted Pope Leo X: and indeed in freedom of style and in richness of fancy they are held equal to Fra Angelico and Simone Memmi. One of them is probably the most superb single specimen in existence. . . . . Unhappily, there remain only these four; the Canticles therefore, is incomplete. Evidently the intention of the painter was to do a miniature for each chapter. But the rich initials and delicate floreated borders have been spared to us and I believe I am fully warranted in starting this superb work of art at the extremely moderate price of £8,000—"

"One moment, if you please!"

There had been a stir at the door and now a voice cut the fusillade of bidding and silenced it. The man who spoke stood at the further wall well up toward the front. He was an entire stranger to Dick—a tall, foreign looking person, carefully dressed and wearing a pointed black beard. He held a book in his hand. The auctioneer, commanding quiet by a gesture, leaned enquiringly toward the newcomer.

"On account of the great value of the item just introduced," the dark man proceeded, in composed, clear English though with a marked foreign accent, "some of us would like to have a little



further information as to its history. A manuscript stated to be worth more than £8,000 deserves to have its pedigree more fully opened to connoisseurs than has here been the case."

The name murmured around the room was "Dulacq—M. Anatole Dulacq." Dick could see Ayloff's excited face turned toward his chief. Meanwhile the auctioneer and his assistant looked both annoyed and puzzled.

"The entire history regarding the discovery of the Canticles has been furnished us by the owner—" he began, but M. Dulacq again interrupted him.

"I make no doubt that you have been satisfied," he said firmly but courteously, "I only wish to point out that *we*, persons invited to purchase this costly manuscript have not been. For instance; the catalogue states that it was discovered and acquired by M. Charles Ventrès during a certain week in July, while touring on the Franco-Italian border. I have here a statement," he unfolded a paper, "made by the Préfeture du Midi, informing me that during that time Mr. Ventrès was not in Italy—was not in France—but was actually in England!"

The argument had completely halted the machinery of the sale. Men began to stir and whisper to each other. Up to this moment, Dick had observed M. Charles still quietly and indifferently keeping his place on the front row just below the auctioneer. But now as that slightly bewildered official turned to him M. Charles leaned forward and said a few words in an undertone. The

auctioneer's face cleared and he again addressed M. Anatole Dulacq.

"We cannot delay the sale longer, M. Dulacq, in order to discuss these questions. Your information is incorrect and based on an error which Mr. Ventris is quite ready to explain. I beg of you to resume your seat and let us proceed." He then spoke out into the room; "In regard to the history of this beautiful volume," he said laying his hand upon it, "the reputation of Mr. Charles Ventris as an authority of many years standing, is sufficient I think, to account for it to any and all of the collectors here present."

"I beg your pardon, but this is what I question," came the reply, swift and startling. "Whatever Mr. Ventris's authority as an expert may have been—I here dispute it *in toto*. Mr. Ventris evidently must in this instance have been deceived. Mr. Ventris cannot account for the Canticles because the Canticles stand under grave suspicion of forgery!"

A stupefied pause followed these words and broke into a growl of protest and ejaculation. "Nonsense!" "An insult!" "Prove your words!" came from various parts of the room and one insistent voice kept repeating "Proof! Proof!"

Very red in the face, the auctioneer leaned over his desk and pounded with his gavel crying, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" M. Charles had stepped up to the dais and looked steadily around the room. His eyes rested on the face of M. Dulacq, with an odd, still expression. His mouth was twisted.



M. Dulacq remained undisturbed in his place, and he too looked around the group of excited and hostile faces.

"I hear someone asking for proof," he said in his edgy voice, "one does not make so serious a charge without it. I have here," and he held up the book he carried, "a Virgil Twelfth century style—also the discovery of M. Charles Ventris and sold by him many years ago to an American collector. As you shall see, it is in workmanship a lovely object, very typical of its period and school.....Do I not see Sir Peter Pyke present—and Mr. Porter Meesom? Perhaps those two gentlemen will not mind coming forward to the dais and comparing the background in this miniature—representing the parting of Dido and Æneas—with that of the fourth miniature of the Canticles?"

The auctioneer tried to protest but decided that the temper of the room demanded that events should take their course. He moved aside and mopped his face, while the two persons indicated came forward to the dais, where Mr. Ventris still stood, head up, his eyes on his accuser.

"I wish to add," and here M. Dulacq slightly raised his voice, "that my firm have had their suspicions for more than a year. We hoped to remain silent; if we have had to make so serious a charge, it has not been our own doing. Ah, Sir Peter! You have been struck? I thought so! But there is yet more."

By this time, these three, the Frenchman and the two experts, dominated the room. The auc-

tioner, now white-faced, had retired and stood looking sideways at Mr. Ventris. He had lost his chance to interfere, for the audience now hung on every word of the speaker's.

"I have in my hand," M. Dulacq moved a step forward and unfolded a roll he carried, "an illuminated address of welcome presented to the Mayor of a French town nearly forty years ago. There is an elaborate border and lettering. The name of the illuminator is signed to it. Will you, Sir Peter, compare the lettering, the workmanship, the initials, with any part of the Canticles and tell me if you think they are by the same hand?"

Silence hung breathless over the room. Dick saw M. Charles's face, and it wore a faint, stiff smile. . . . . Then Sir Peter straightened himself and put up his eye-glass.

"Thank you, Sir Peter. Are you satisfied?"

Sir Peter rubbed his eye-glass and looked across the dais at the auctioneer. "So far as I am concerned," his gruff voice could be heard, "I am satisfied that this sale should not proceed."

Then, looking neither to right nor left, he hobbled clumsily off the dais and out of the room, never turning his head and with indignation in every line of his stiff back.

Now, indeed, hubbub broke loose. M. Anatole closely followed Sir Peter; others sprang to their feet. Dick watched Mr. Ventris, who had stood in his place, so quiet, so quiet. . . . . For an instant he was seen to lick his lips and his hand



shook.....Then he sprang forward, while his voice pealed through the room.

"My friends!" he cried, and his eyes were wide and blazing, "Gentlemen! Don't you know these Yankee firms by this time? Haven't you heard of their tricks? That they will stoop to anything? blacken anyone? The price was too high for M. Dulacq—he was disappointed—that, that is all gentlemen!"

For one moment his charm, his personal force swayed them—they stood undecided—but only for a moment. The honest face of old Sir Peter Pyke had passed through the room like a torch. M. Charles continued to talk: his voice, that marvellous voice, rose in its poignancy almost to a shriek... People turned their backs and streamed out.

The Canticles still lay on its desk like a king on his throne, but it was a king deserted by his courtiers. When Dick, at the door, looked pitifully back, the auctioneer had come up and laid his hand soothingly on M. Charles's arm. He was still gesticulating at the crowd and something in his face showed him to be lost—lost—.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE DOOR IN THE PANELLING

**A** MESSAGE from Sir John Flippin, which Dick had been expecting, reached him early on the same evening and sent him hurrying to the barrister's house. At Hyde Park Corner he bought the Evening Standard and was not a little surprised to see the events which were for him so fateful and so dramatic, chronicled tamely under the caption, "Disturbance at Messrs. Christie's—Serious Accusations," in a trivial inch of print.

This was not the first time he had consulted Sir John since the latter's return from Norway. The two had already canvassed the occurrences of the last fortnight in a long talk, during which the K. C. underwent a far greater mental disturbance than his face had ever betrayed. His ejaculations of "God bless my soul! This is a very shocking affair!" passed into a close, shrewd cross-examination of Monkton, begun on a harsh note for which the young man was sadly prepared as inevitable. It had comforted him somewhat however, to notice that by the time the cross-ex-



amination was ended, Sir John's manner had regained much of its geniality. Evidently, he did not regard Dick in the light of a wilful impostor.

When he arrived at Sir John's and was shown into the study, he found Mrs. Byrd there, deep in talk with the master of the house. That lady wore an air which is best described as one of leisurely alertness. Her plainly drawn grey hair and pleasant, powerful face were in odd contrast to her blue evening dress, her wrap of embroidered Chinese shawls and her fine pearls. She looked the embodiment of cool, aloof prosperity and Dick had hard work in his own mind to regard her as the core of those feverish activities concerning himself and so many others. She gave him a smiling nod and Sir John, with an off-hand abstracted greeting, bade him be seated while he continued the conversation.

"Then the *coup* of this morning," he was asking, "is entirely your work?"

"It is," she affirmed. "When I got hold of Anatole Dulacq I put it up to him. I told him he and his brother had shilly-shallied and played the timid game too long as it was. I pointed out he had small choice. He had this one chance, to hit, to hit hard and to hit *first*. Then at least his firm would appear to be acting wholly in the interests of honesty. They might lose *that* sale but they'd still be trusted. Otherwise I don't believe there was going to be enough left of Dulacq's to pay the referee."

"Just so. I see." the K. C. commented, "You were quite right of course."

"Of course: and finally he saw that I was. Particularly when the illuminated address arrived from France."

"I was wondering about that. How on earth did you discover such a thing?"

"Oh, I guessed," she answered gaily, "a detective is mostly just a good guesser, you know. When I saw the Canticles in Paris I saw it was the work of an artist—a real artist, whether he was a fraud or no. Work like that couldn't be produced without apprenticeship, devotion and training. I felt that the forgery idea would only occur to somebody who'd already given proof of talent for the art. Human nature's an odd thing—vanity leads most of us I guess, Sir John."

Sir John nodded. "You interest me deeply, my dear madam," he said, "pray proceed."

"Well, after that, it just worked itself out. If painting like that had received recognition and the painter had been known and successful there would have been no need to pretend it was old. Some obscure poor devil then, but one who left proof of his skill most likely, if we know where to look. I set to work in France and made some inquiries, and that was the result. 'Twas a close shave, however, for it only just reached us in time."

She was interrupted by the telephone which stood on Sir John's desk and when she had replaced the receiver she turned to them with a grave look.

"If you need to get any private information



out of Charles Ventris, Sir John, you'd better be getting along to Monkton House. Yes.... ..he's still there, they say, and he'll stay there. There's lots to be gained for him in brazening it out. But that was my friend Peter Godston, who's had a busy day at Shank with Hays and Coles. He wants to ask questions too, I'm thinking."

"Are you coming?" Dick asked her, but she gave a little distasteful shudder.

"Not I!" said she, and gathered up her gorgeous embroideries, "my work in this job is all but finished and I prefer to leave the gory details to the police. No, no! I must be getting home to my lodgings and writing a letter to Jeanie. Oh yes, I'll send her your love. So long, my boy!"

A taxi was got for her, and then a second in which Sir John and Dick set forth. The barrister kept silence at first and Dick was oppressed with a cloud of pain and apprehension. That it should be this way he was again to meet M. Charles—! After awhile, Sir John said: "It's bad Monkton, bad, and it's going to be worse. I've a cable from Scrope—he was beside himself. There's been a good bit of laxity in the estate accounts, it seems—borrowings and such informalities, to call them by no harsher name. Much had drifted into Ventris's hands, even during Sir Piers' life-time. He *must* be open with us concerning your affair—it is his only hope."

As the cab turned off St. James's into the well-remembered narrow street, Sir John made a noise in his throat.

"Too late!" he said.

Inspector Godston, and two other men were standing before the door of Monkton House. When Richard and Sir John alighted the Inspector gave them a serious inclination of the head and once more set his finger to the bell.

Andrews, who opened the door, was evidently taken aback at the group.

"I have orders to admit Sir Richard only," was his protest, "otherwise my master left word he was not to be disturbed—"

Inspector Godston however paid small attention to Andrews but marched past him and began to mount the stair, followed by Sir John and Dick. The two plain clothes men, at a sign from their chief, remained in the lower hall with the servant who now looked frightened to death.

They knocked at the familiar door but the Inspector did not wait for an answer. He threw it open—the glow from the room within seemed to suffuse the whole hall. Once again, Dick felt as if he had stepped into the heart of a golden, yellow sunset—a soft, rich light enfolded him. The room was just as he remembered it on that April evening when he stood, dazzled, hesitating on the threshold; its beautiful contents all in order, a touch of perfume lingering in the air. Just as then, the owner sat in his deep leather chair, facing the entrance, under the standard lamp, only—he did not rise and come forward. Mr. Ventris sat in an easy position, dressed for dinner and with a book open on his knees. Between his fingers spread upon the pages, one caught the gleam of gold and red and blue. He must be



very much absorbed in the book, Dick thought, for his head was bent down and at their entrance he did not even raise it.....So strange, so unexpected was this tranquil figure, deep in his chair and bent over the page—so strange that it did not move or turn or look up, that the visitors paused as it were uncertain on the threshold. Then Dick heard Sir John Flippin say, "By God!" and then—almost in admiration—"How like him!"

With the words, mystery passed into sad certainty. The Inspector was disgusted.

"I told them at the Yard, he was likely to play some such trick," he remarked. "He has been dead an hour or more.....I'd better have my men up, we must make a report—Where's the telephone—?"

They turned to leave the room. Dick had a sudden onrush of personal grief: he did not wish the others to notice and so he said nothing, but lowered his head.

"Richard—Sir John—one moment!"

In the far corner of the room, a pierced screen was hurriedly thrust aside and a tall woman came suddenly out from behind it. She was enveloped in a dark cloak and she moved swiftly toward them with hand uplifted. Even in that instant, Dick saw that behind the screen a door in the panelling stood ajar.

"One moment—all of you—Richard, I beg, one little moment!" she panted out, her face and voice quivering. "Before you send for your men—I have a message to deliver to Richard—listen to me!"

The Inspector's notebook was in his hand.

"Who are you, madam, and what do you know about this man's death?"

"It's Lady Monkton," Sir John said.

She tried for calm and in part, attained it. She grasped the top of the dead man's chair and held on..... "He asked me—to come here at eight .....by the old garden passage.....When I came..... thus I found him.....but there was a letter.....Some of it I cannot read.....He said 'Tell Dick Monkton all you know. I want him to hear the truth.' "

Flippin and the Inspector consulted together, the while she stood looking at them with desperate eyes; and then Sir John came toward her....

"Tell us what you know," he said not ungentily—"the time has come to be frank—"

"The time has come," she repeated; "Sir John—Richard—you will not think harshly of him—promise me that?"

"In the presence of death we will listen charitably, madam," Sir John gently responded, "Will you sit?"

She shook her head and the three men took chairs facing her. Pity for her was strong in Richard's heart. She stood there beside the dead man: she put her arm as it were protectingly around his chair-back, her glance dropped now and again to the still figure: she summoned herself to tell his strange story.

"In the summer time, now forty years ago, Sir Piers Monkton, travelling in his own carriage stopped at a little village in Provence. He had



succeeded to Shank but a few months before and was making some purchases here and there for his collections. Word had reached him that in this village church was a chest of ancient manuscripts, so he paused to see what he might find therein. The parish priest was absent, but at the presbytère Sir Piers found a tall youth of nineteen, who named himself as a pupil of Father Sebastian and opened the chest for the Englishman. Sir Piers found little of value; he bought and paid for a sheet or two showing traces of interesting text. The price paid was trifling, but in the course of his conversation with this remarkably intelligent young student, a good deal was said about the value of fine illuminations and the prices they brought in London or Paris. The listening youth made note of Sir Piers' hotel in the town nearby and promised to report whatever he might find in the neighborhood. In a fortnight he re-appeared with a single sheet, from the Second Gospel, enriched with an initial letter of striking beauty. You have both seen this; it hangs framed at Shank with a curtain before it.....

"Sir Piers paid the price asked for this leaf with enthusiasm and was greedy for further discoveries. He kept the youth with him and during their talks a great deal of information concerning collectors, sales, manuscripts and their study, passed into the possession of the younger man. When they parted, the latter had more money in his pocket than he had ever had in his life.....

"Eight or nine months later Sir Piers again made his appearance in the neighborhood and the student met him with two alleged discoveries. One, a rather common-place missal was genuine enough—the other was the first of that series of dazzling works of art which were the delight—and alas! the ruin—of this dead man. It contained nine large and twenty smaller miniatures set in harmonious text amid borders of suave and intricate elaboration. Sir Piers was in ecstasy: he was by nature a dull man but susceptible to two main emotions—flattery and devotion to his possessions. This youth satisfied his craving for both while displaying a technical knowledge of which Sir Piers well knew the value. His was moreover a supple and fascinating personality; to be in his society was delightful and he paid the elder man an incessant and skilful deference. Sir Piers had never had a more congenial companion. Then and there he carried off his new friend for a trip into Italy and before the year was out, the stranger was settled at Shank in the position of expert secretary and curator."

Lady Monkton paused, appeared to consider, glanced pitifully down upon the figure in the chair, straightened her back, steadied her voice and spoke again.

"What I have told you of the original meeting of these two men, Charles and my husband, I have learned at different times from each of them. What I am about to tell you lies within my own knowledge and experience."



## CHAPTER XXXVI

### THE LAST ILLUMINATION

**T**HE name of this youth was Charles Ventrissier. He was illegitimate; his mother had been a Provençale, his father was said to be English and he had been born in England. In later years, it pleased his fancy to hint at a noble origin, but I think that came only from his romantic imagination—from his vanity. He was always naively surprised at his success in the world and at the effect made by his personality..

“I knew him first as a struggling, embittered boy, devoured by ambition and feeling the spur of distinguished talents. Charity supplied a little money for his education: it was supposed he would take Orders. His artistic skill brought small commissions—ancient documents entrusted to him for restoration—an illuminated address or two was ordered from him when occasion arose. One of these was produced at the sale for his undoing: the signature in the corner was ‘C. Ventrissier.’

“To such a youth, in such circumstances the friendship with Sir Piers was like a door opening

into heaven. Almost overnight he found himself respected, consulted, well-paid, surrounded with everything that his soul craved. Did he care for the friend to whom he owed all this? Yes: in his way he was devoted to Piers. After that first purchase he never permitted his friend to buy anything that he knew to be false..... what he forged he sold to others and the money was placed at the service of Shank.

“Although he made large sums yet Shank kept him perpetually poor as it kept Piers. During the early years of his curatorship he studied, he worked incessantly over the collections, confirming his inclination for such objects until it became an overmastering passion. By this means the hoards which had been in confusion, were re-ordered and arranged; their richness was talked of; Charles made a catalogue of the paintings, Piers of the furniture; articles from their joint hands appeared in artistic journals; connoisseurs began to make pilgrimage to Shank. Charles had strengthened his hold by his discovery—it was a genuine discovery—of the “Treyze Saintes Hystoires” and in the same hidden place he also found the waste of the monastery library—sheets of parchment and vellum; old bindings, a tempting mass of material. About this time, the need for money becoming acute, he removed this mass to the little roof-room and began his preparation for a second forgery.

“Undoubtedly he had expected Sir Piers to question his first production, perhaps even to detect it and if that had happened he had prepared



a defence. Nothing of the sort threatened; Sir Piers was carried off his feet, and Charles saw that if the circumstances were romantic and disarming, a collector's judgment was often in abeyance. Therefore he built upon this weakness and so unconsciously followed the method of another great forger, Constantine Simonides.

"Charles was a master-craftsman; a great artist. He worked always on ancient materials, if possible on a manuscript already begun—one having existing text or traces of painting. Once started, like all real painters, he expressed himself—toiling as no monk ever toiled, till his poor eyes were inflamed; but loving every instant of his labor. He walked at ease in the joy of his craft: I do not think he ever thought of it as moral obliquity. He prepared a studio in Southern France, where he carried his work to be completed and which he used for the first time the year after the discovery of the Treyze Hystoires. The volume thus produced sold in Paris that autumn with two inferior but genuine examples, for a very large sum, and from that day, Charles was committed; his own tastes had become exceedingly luxurious; and there was always Shank.

"Naturally, Sir Piers was thinking of marriage—of which Charles approved. Miss Vignoles was well dowered, and if a little spoiled yet seemed in every way suitable as mistress for Shank. You know that this marriage ended in tragedy. I think his failure to win Lady Monkton's liking was a great shock to Charles. Up to that time, his charm had never failed him: his

influence over Sir Piers deepened with every year; how could he have expected this girl should regard him with such jealous hostility?"

As she approached that past time, Lady Monkton faltered. The men who listened to her narrative sat as still as a stone. She continued:

"I speak of things long past, of sorrow and of wrong; I tell of my own part in them.....I had come from France to Shank, at Charles's wish, to act as secretary. Charles's wish was to me always everything in the world. When I say that, it is enough, is it not? You will not expect me to say more.....?"

"I came and I found a strange state of things.....the little Lady Monkton wild with jealousy of her husband's friend....and oh, Charles was a bad enemy! She hated Shank as well: she would do nothing for Shank: she refused to aid with money and when an heir was expected—she did not hesitate to say that she was going to teach him to regard Shank as a burden—an incubus. I knew by the way Charles looked at her when she said that, it was duel to the death between them.....I was often sorry for her. Charles was clever—oh he was so very clever, with his devilish deference to Piers and his devotion, always shining in contrast to her indifference! And I? I did everything that Charles wished me to do—just as I am doing it now.....

"It was easy to gain an influence over Sir Piers' mind, and I came to see things as Charles saw them—so the time came, and when Sir Piers asked me, I married him. I, too, have come to



love Shank and to serve Shank as he and Charles did. Shank was like a beautiful witch that held us all enchanted. I worked hard for Shank and I don't think Sir Piers was unhappy. I was unhappy, but I did what Charles wished—and shut my eyes to all else. It was good to be blind.

“Then Piers died and Charles faced a terrible future. The thought of Lycett Monkton appalled him. When he saw mention of your father's sale, Dick, he was reminded of the Virgil—an early forgery, and so he bought it back. At the same time he heard about your physical inheritance of the Monkton traits and wrote you. At the first, I am sure he had no set plan, he stood ready to turn the affair into the kindly visit it seemed to be. I saw you myself, Dick, that first night from behind the screen there. The little door opens into a cloister walk through the garden and Charles often made use of it. . . . . I saw you—and I too, was immensely struck.

“Of course Charles knew more than he told about Mr. Richard Monkton. Not only did he know of your existence—but the young American lady had showed you to him the day her husband had brought home to her the gift of a little, white fur rug lined with blue, to wrap her baby on the cold winter journey. Charles remembered it all clearly, clearly—it seemed in his mind to make success quite certain. And what were letters to Charles?

“But for all his cleverness and knowledge, Charles was utterly ignorant of the law. In this ignorance he supposed that these letters would in

themselves be an all-sufficient proof: he found that he was mistaken. Forced to produce Coles to back up the letters, he found he must produce the writer of them, and thus he delivered himself into the power of evil people. Danger deepened; the pair drained him of money; the woman McNeil made slips in her tale; events began to lead Charles instead of Charles leading events and he grew oh! so uneasy! You too, Diccon, began to worry him: he had supposed you would be quickly dazzled into acquiescence. But you never seemed thoroughly under his influence and somehow, Charles came to feel a great affection for you so that he hated to open the blackness of his deceits to you. . . . . Your friendship with Sir John here forced his hand once or twice, and hurt his pride; because he had counted on carrying Sir John with him. But chiefly, Diccon, Charles wished to govern you, to lead you as he had done Piers, to be all in all, to be first with you. . . . . Jealousy, I think was half the cause of his anger. . . . . and jealousy, as well as fear, caused him to consent to the wicked plans of Hays regarding Miss Lang: he knew she had discovered things: and Charles, alas! was in Hays' power, as Hays had once been in his master's. So he let Hays plot to discredit Miss Lang and when he found she had escaped from Hays—oh he was furious! He did not wish her harmed—Charles didn't approve of that, but he did wish so to discredit her that her evidence would never touch him more—and *you* would believe him and turn toward him again. For



Diccon, he was fond of you—surely, tonight shows it?”

Her imploring voice was horrible to Dick, he covered his eyes. To see her stand there, with her arms about that still figure, to hear her poignant and tragic effort to excuse to defend him. . . . .! To see her courage as she went steadily on—!

“Yes; he was fond of you: but he never for an instant cared how much you might suffer from his acts; he had never cared for my suffering—and I have suffered since I was nineteen and left my home because he wished it. No: there was only one thing Charles loved more than himself, and that was Shank. . . . .Shank Charles would never leave. . . . .on Shank he would keep his grip at whatever cost. If beauty can be evil, oh! that beauty was evil for Charles—he sustained, he toiled for it, he worshipped it—he put his great, great talents to work for it and never thought to ask if his acts were good or bad. . . . . Diccon, for some time past I have felt that on the subject of Shank, Charles had ceased to be entirely sane. . . . .

“I come now to things which I do not know, which I can only guess. Charles must have shot the spy in the crypt. He had run over from his hiding-place in France for certain materials needed in his work. Long afterwards I learned he was in Shank that night. Hays knew. Yes: Hays was arrested this afternoon. Of course he must have told.”

Some movement of horror in the listening group caused her to put her hand to her throat.

Then once more she laid it caressingly on the dead shoulder, and her voice, with its strange, fluting lisp, went on;

“I repeat—he could not have been himself these last weeks. He seemed amazingly reckless. The Canticles was, he exulted, his finest achievement. He had begun the work long ago, meaning to do the eight paintings, but the immediate pressure made it necessary to put the manuscript on sale at once. I implored him to wait, to consider his danger, he would not listen. He was so proud of his work that I honestly think he forgot it was the antiquity which counted; he seemed to forget it was a forgery. Then he did other mad things. . . . . he painted my portrait in one of the miniatures and his memory must have played him a fatal trick about the background. Evidently, he repeated himself, a thing he had never done before. Yet he was obstinate; he was confident; not once he thought of giving up the sale. And then today, everything crashed. He could not live after that.”

She ceased. She looked piteously from one of them to the other; and then she turned to Dick, pulling herself together with a small, final gesture of the hands. “I think, Richard, I have told you all that Charles wished. . . . .”

Dick was quite unable to answer. Somehow or other Sir John got him out of the room, leaving the Inspector with Lady Monkton. What followed they neither knew nor sought to know.

Dick found himself with the barrister walking rapidly up St. James's. The air was sweet and



wholesome to them for they had been in torment. Light fog was gathering over Piccadilly, was it that or his tears, that turned the lamps into hazy nebulae? He knew nothing until Sir John paused, bought a paper and silently thrust it into his companion's hand. There was a headline saying: "Fatal outcome of the Maitland-Monkton Expedition—total loss of life." Below was a despatch from Australia stating that when the relief ship Penguin had come on the explorers' camp, it was to find their dead bodies, including that of the leader and Sir Lycett Monkton. When Dick stupefied over the news, raised his head, he was conscious of Sir John's sonorous voice giving solemn utterance to a Latin quotation.

In life there may be a consolation that we stand for what we are. When the scandal of the Ventriss forgeries and the Monkton claimant died away—and they made a great noise—Dick did not find himself without friends. Through the influence of Sir John Flippin he obtained work in an important Anglo-American firm, where he does so well that he plans soon to return, married, to his own country. The home he looks for is to stand in the most suave of valleys, where corn-fields, in the warm wind, toss their leaves in a continual emerald glitter. It will be just a plain Pennsylvania colonial house with broad porches and big hearths, nor are there likely to be any objects of art in it for a long time. He talks and thinks of his future home often and very happily; but there come moments when he falls silent, dreaming of another house, vast and old and

splendid, with towers and gilded vanes, with courts and fountains, with the silver and carvings, porcelains and books and paintings of a thousand years. This rises before him and he thinks of it—not with regret but with dread—as an embodied symbol of that fatal and alluring beauty for whose sake, since the days of Helen, men have imperilled their souls.

THE END









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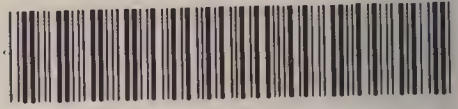


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